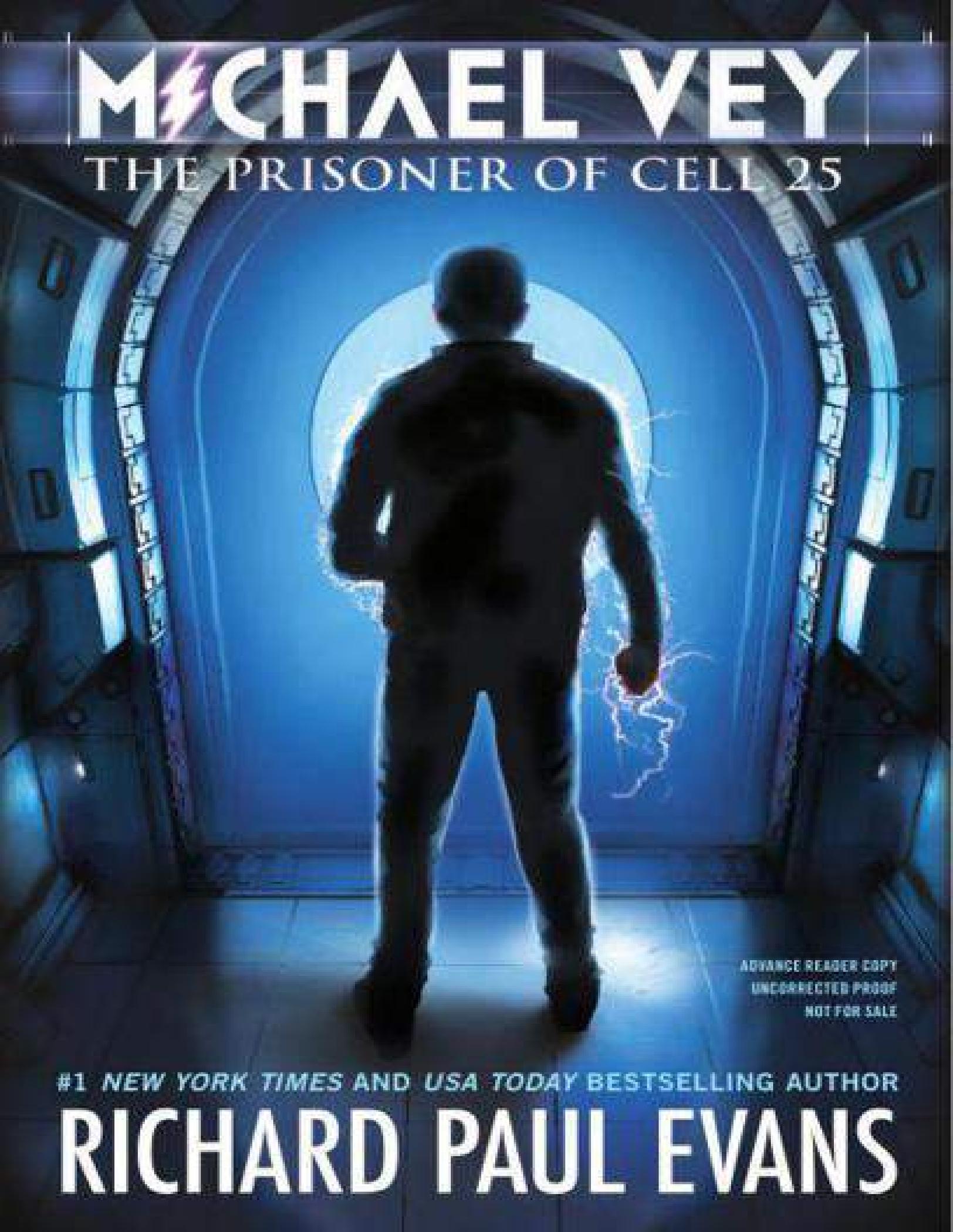


MICHAEL VEY

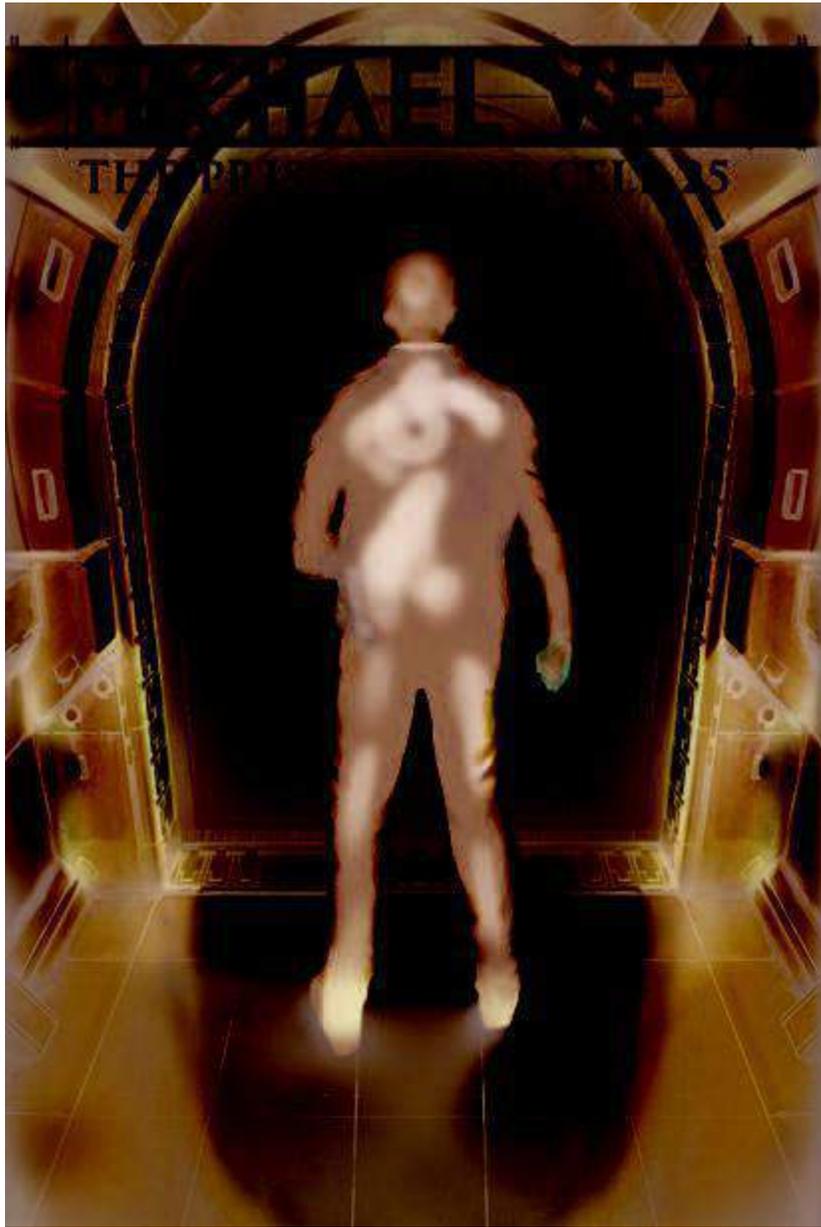


THE PRISONER OF CELL 25

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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* AND *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RICHARD PAUL EVANS





ADVANCE READER'S COPY

SIMON & SCHUSTER CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING

MICHAEL VEY, THE PRISONER OF CELL 25

RICHARD PAUL EVANS

MERCURY INK/SIMON PULSE

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

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ISBN: 978-1-4516-5650-3

FORMAT: Hardcover

AGES: 12 up

PAGES: 336

TITLE: Michael Vey: The Prisoner of Cell 25

AUTHOR: Richard Paul Evans

IMPRINT: Simon Pulse/Mercury Ink

To Michael

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PART ONE

1. Chopsticks and Spiders

“Have you found the last two?” The voice on the phone was angry and coarse, like the sound of car tires over broken glass.

“Not yet,” the well-dressed man on the other end of the phone replied. “Not yet.” He put on his dark glasses even though it was close to midnight. “But we believe we’re close—and they still don’t know that we’re hunting them.”

“You *believe* you’re close?”

“They’re two children among a billion—finding them is like finding a lost chopstick in China.”

“Is that what you want me to tell the board?”

The well-dressed man’s voice rose. “*Remind* the Board that I’ve already found fifteen of the seventeen children. I’ve put out a million-dollar bounty on the last two, we’ve got spiders crawling the Web,

and we have a whole team of investigators scanning global records for their whereabouts. It’s just a matter of time before we find them—or they step into one of our traps.”

“*Time* isn’t on our side,” the voice returned sharply. “Those kids are already too old. You know how difficult they are to *turn* at this age.”

“I know better than anyone,” the man said, tapping his ruby-capped pen on his desk. “But I have my ways. And if they don’t turn, there’s always Cell Twenty-Five.”

There was a long pause, then the voice on the phone replied darkly, “Yes. There’s always Cell Twenty-Five.”

2. The Beginning

It's not like I was looking for trouble. I didn't have to. At my height it just always found me.

My name is Michael Vey, and the story I'm about to tell you is strange. Very strange. It's my story.

If you passed me walking home from school you probably wouldn't even notice me. That's because I'm just a kid like you. I go to school like you. I get bullied like you. Unlike you, I live in Idaho. Don't ask me what state Idaho is in—news flash—Idaho *is* a state.

The fact that most people don't know where Idaho is, is exactly why my mother and I moved here—so people wouldn't find us. But that's part of my story.

Besides living in Idaho, I'm different from you in other ways. For one, I have Tourette's syndrome. You probably know less about Tourette's syndrome than you do Idaho. Usually when you see someone on TV pretending to have Tourette's syndrome, they're shouting swear words or barking like a dog. Most of us with Tourette's don't do that. I mostly just shrug and blink my eyes a lot. If I'm really anxious, I'll also clear my throat or make a gulping noise. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes kids make fun of me. It's no picnic having Tourette's, but there are worse things that can happen to you—like having your dad die of a heart attack when you're eight. Believe me, that's much worse. I'm still not over that. Maybe I never will be.

There's something else you don't know about me. It's my secret.

Something that scares people more than you would believe. That secret is the reason we moved to Idaho in the first place. But, again, that's part of my story. So I might as well tell it to you.

3. The Armpit

Mr. Dallstrom's office is as good a place to begin as any. Or as bad a place. Mr. Dallstrom is the principal of Meridian High School, where I go to school. If you ask me, ninth grade is the armpit of life. And there I was in the very stinkiest part of that armpit—the principal's office. I was sitting in Mr. Dallstrom's office, blinking like crazy.

You could guess that I'm not fond of Mr. Dallstrom, which would be stating the obvious like saying, "breathing is important" or "Rice Krispies squares are the greatest food ever invented." No one at Meridian was fond of Mr. Dallstrom except Ms. Duncan, who directed the Glee Club. She had a picture of Dallstrom on her desk, which she sometimes stared at with soft, googly eyes. Every time Dallstrom came over the PA system, she would furiously whack her baton on a music stand to quiet us. Then, after he'd said his piece, she would get all red-faced and sweaty, and remind us of how lucky we were to be led through the treacherous wilderness of high school by such a manly and steadfast defender of public education.

Mr. Dallstrom is a bald, thin scarecrow of a man with a poochy stomach. Think of a pregnant Abraham Lincoln with no beard and a yellow toupee instead of a top hat and you get the picture. He also looks like he's a hundred years old. At least.

When I was in fifth grade our teacher told us 'the easiest way to remember the difference between *PRINCI PLE*, (an underlying law or ethic) and *PRINCI PAL*, (the chief administrator of a school) is that the Principal is your PAL.' Believe me, Mr. Dallstrom did not put the PAL in Principal.

This was the second time that month I'd been called to his office for something someone else did to me. Mr. Dallstrom was big on punishing the victim.

"I believe this is the second time you've been in my office this month," Mr. Dallstrom said to me, his eyes half closed. ". . . Is that right, Mr. Vey?"

That was the other thing about Mr. Dallstrom—he liked to ask questions that he already knew the answer to. I was never sure if I was supposed to answer him or not. I mean, he knew the answer, and I knew the answer, so what was the point? Bottom line, it was the second time I'd been locked in my locker by Jack Vranes and his friends that month. This time they put me in upside down and I nearly passed out before the custodian unlocked my locker and dragged me down to Mr. Dallstrom's office.

Jack was like seventeen and still in ninth grade. He'd been held back so many times he had a driver's license, a car, a mustache, and a tattoo. He sometimes called himself Jackal, which is a pretty accurate description, since both he and the animal prey on smaller mammals.

Jack had biceps the size of ripe Florida oranges and wasn't afraid to use them. Actually, he loved to use them. He and his gang, Mitchell and Wade, watched ultimate fighting, and Jack took Brazilian jujitsu lessons at a gym not far from the school. His dream in life was to someday fight in the Octagon, where he could pound people and get paid for it.

"Is that right?" Dallstrom repeated, still staring at me. I ticked a dozen times, then said, "But, sir, it wasn't my fault. They shoved me inside my locker upside down." He wasn't looking very moved by my plight so I continued. "There were three of them and they're a lot bigger than me. A *lot* bigger."

My hope for sympathy was met by Mr. Dallstrom's infamous "stare o' death." Really, you'd have to see it to understand. Last quarter, when we were studying Greek mythology and we got to the part about Medusa—a Gorgon woman who could turn people to stone by looking into their eyes—I figured out where Mr. Dallstrom had come from. Unfortunately, I hadn't the sense to keep my mouth shut about it and blurted out, "That must be Mr. Dallstrom's great, great, great, great grandmother."

Everyone in the class had laughed. Everyone except for Mr. Dallstrom, who had picked that precise moment to slip into our class. I spent a week in after-school detention, which wasn't all bad because at least I was safe from

Jack and his posse, who somehow never got sent to detention no matter how many kids they stuffed headfirst into the lunchroom garbage cans or locked in their lockers. Anyway, that had officially put me on Mr. Dallstrom's troublemaker list.

"Mr. Vey, you cannot be stuffed into a locker without your consent," Dallstrom said, which may be the dumbest thing ever said in a school. "You should have resisted." That's like blaming someone who was struck by lightning for getting in the way.

"But I tried, sir."

"Obviously not hard enough." He took out a pen. "Who are these boys who allegedly stuffed you into your locker?" Mr. Dallstrom cocked his head to one side, his pen wagging impatiently in front of him. I stared at the pen in its hypnotic trajectory.

"I'm waiting, Mr. Vey. Their names?"

There was no way I was going to tell him. First, he already knew who had done it. Everyone knew Jack had put more kids than textbooks into lockers. Second, ratting out Jack was the shortest route to death. I just looked at Dallstrom, my eyes blinking like crazy.

"Stop twitching and answer my question."

"I can't tell you," I finally said.

"Can't or won't?"

Pick one, I thought. "I forgot who did it."

Mr. Dallstrom continued staring at me through those half-closed eyes of his. "Did you now?" He stopped wagging his pen and set it on the desk. "I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Vey. Now you'll have to take their punishment as well. Four weeks in after-school detention. I believe you know where detention is held."

“Yes, sir. It’s in the lunchroom.”

“Good. Then you’ll have no trouble finding your way there.”

Like I said, Mr. Dallstrom excelled at punishing the victim. He signed a tardy excuse note and handed it to me. “Give that to your teacher. You can go back to your class now, Mr. Vey.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, not entirely certain what I was thanking him for. I walked out of his office and slowly down the long, empty corridor to biology. The hallway was lined with posters made by the Basketball Boosters’ Club with messages like Go Warriors, sink the VikinGs—that sort of thing—rendered in bright poster paints.

I got my backpack from my locker, then went to class.

My biology teacher, Mr. Poulsen, a short, balding man with thick eyebrows and a massive comb-over, was in the middle of lecturing and stopped mid-sentence at my entrance. “Glad you decided to join us, Mr. Vey.”

“Sorry. I was at the principal’s office. Mr. Dallstrom said to give this to you.” I handed him my note. He took the paper without looking at it. “Sit down. We’re reviewing for tomorrow’s test.”

Every eye in the class followed me as I walked to my desk. I sat on the second row from the back just behind my best friend, Ostin Liss, who is one of the smartest kids in the universe. Ostin’s name looks European or something, but it isn’t. His mother named him that because he was born in Austin, Texas. It was his private curse that she had spelled it wrong. I suspect that Ostin was adopted, because I couldn’t figure out how someone that smart could come from someone who couldn’t spell the name of the city she lived in. But even if Ostin’s mom wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box, I liked her a lot. She spoke with a Texan accent and called everyone “honey,” which may sound annoying but it wasn’t. She was always nice and kept a supply of red licorice in their pantry just because she knew I liked it and my mother didn’t buy candy.

Ostin never got shoved into his locker, probably because he was wider than it—not that Jack and his friends left him alone. They didn't. In fact he had suffered the ultimate humiliation from Jack and his friends. He'd been pantsed in public.

“How'd it go with Dallstrom?” Ostin whispered.

I shook my head. “Brutal.”

As I sat down, Taylor Ridley, who sat in the desk to my left, turned and smiled at me. Taylor is a cheerleader and one of the prettiest girls at Meridian. Heck, she's one of the prettiest girls in any high school anywhere in the world. She has a face that could be on the cover of a beauty magazine, long, light brown hair and big brown eyes the color of maple syrup. Since I'm being completely honest here, I'll admit that I had a crush on her from the second I first saw her. It took me less than a day to realize that so did everyone else at Meridian.

Taylor was always nice to me. At first I hoped she was nice because she liked me, but really she's just one of those people who is nice to everyone. Nice or not, it didn't matter. She was way out of my league. Like a thousand miles out of my league. So I never told anyone about my secret crush—not even Ostin, who I told everything. Some dreams are just too embarrassing to share.

Anyway, whenever Taylor looked at me, it made my tics go wild. Stress does that to people with Tourette's. I forced myself not to blink as I sat down and pulled my biology book out of my backpack.

That's the thing about my tics. If I try real hard, I can delay them, but I can't make them go away. It's like having a bad itch. You can ignore it for a little while, but it's going to build up until you scratch.

I've learned tricks to hide my tics. Like sometimes I'll drop a pencil on the ground, then when I bend down to get it, I'll blink or grimace like crazy. I'm sure the kids around me think I'm really clumsy because sometimes I'll drop my pencil four or five times in one class.

Anyway, between Dallstrom and Jack and Taylor, I was blinking like an old neon sign.

Poulsen started up again. “Okay, class, we were talking about electricity and the body. ‘I sing the body electric,’ said the poet Whitman. Who, pray, can tell me what role electricity plays in the body?”

He panned the room with his dusty gaze, clearly disappointed with the lack of participation. “You better know this, people. It’s on your test tomorrow.”

“Electricity runs our heart,” the girl with massive braces on the front row said.

“Cor-rect,” he said. “And what else?”

Taylor raised her hand. “It signals all of our nerves and thoughts.”

“That’s right, Miss Ridley. And where does this electricity come from?” He looked around the room. “Where does the electricity come from? Come on, people.” It was dangerous when no one was answering because that’s when he started hunting out those least likely to answer correctly. “How about you, Mr. Morris?”

“Uh, batteries?”

The class laughed.

“Brilliant,” Poulsen said, shaking his head. “Batteries. Okay, Mr. Morris, perhaps it’s time you changed your batteries, because clearly yours are running down. Where does electricity come from, Mr. Vey?”

I swallowed. “Electrolytes?” I said.

“That would be true, Mr. Vey, if you were an electric eel.”

Everyone laughed again. Taylor glanced over at me sympathetically. I dropped my pencil on the floor.

Ostin raised his hand.

“Mr. Liss,” Poulsen said. “Enlighten us.”

Ostin straightened himself up in his chair like he was about to deliver a lecture, which he was.

“The human body generates an electrical current through chemical concentrations in the nerves in a process called bioelectrogenesis.

Whenever a nerve signal is sent, potassium ions flood out of nerve cells and sodium ions flood in. Both of these ions have slightly different charges and so the difference in ionic concentrations inside and outside the nerve cell creates a charge which our bodies process as electricity.”

“Bravo, Mr. Liss. Harvard awaits. For those of you who have no idea what Mr. Liss just said, I’ll write that on the board. Bio-elec-trogen-e-sis.”

When Poulsen’s back was turned, Ostin turned around and whispered, “What happened with Dallstrom? Did Jack get detention?”

I shook my head. “No, I got detention.”

His eyebrows rose. “For getting shoved into your own locker?”

“Yeah.”

“Dallstrom’s a tool.”

“*That* I know.”

4. The Cheerleader

That Wednesday felt like one of the longest days in school ever. I had no idea that it wasn't even close to being over. After the final bell rang, Ostin and I walked to our lockers, which were next to each other.

“Want to come over and play Halo?” Ostin asked.

“Can't. I've got detention, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I'll knock on your door when I get home.”

Ostin and I lived just two doors from each other in the same apartment building.

“I won't be home. I have clogging lessons at four.”

“Ugh,” I said. It was hard to imagine Ostin doing any physical activity, but dancing with a bunch of seven-year-old girls wearing black, patent leather tap shoes was like a bad car wreck—gross, but you just have to look.

“You've got to get out of that, man. If anyone here finds out, you're ruined for life.”

“I know. But the clogging teacher's my mom's cousin and Mom says she needs the money and I need the exercise.”

“It's still cruel,” I said, shutting my locker. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

He put out his fist. “Bones.”

“Bones,” I said, bumping his fist even though I was sick of doing it—I mean, it was okay the first *million* times.

The hallways were crowded with students as I walked with my backpack down to the lunchroom. Ms. Johnson, a young, new English teacher, had

just been assigned to supervise detention, which I thought was a good thing. She was reputed to be cool and nice, which, I hoped, meant she might let us out early.

I walked up to her. I had to force myself not to tic. “I’m Michael Vey. I’m here for detention.”

She smiled at me like I’d just arrived at a dinner party. “Hi, Michael. Welcome.” She looked down at her clipboard and marked my name on her roll. “Go ahead and pick a table.”

The smell of lunch still lingered in the air (which was a punishment of its own), and I could hear the lunch workers behind the metal window screens preparing for tomorrow’s disaster.

There were three other students in detention: two boys and one girl. I was smaller than all of them and the only one who didn’t look like a homicidal psychopath. As I looked around the room for a place to sit the girl looked at me and scowled, warning me away from her table. I found an empty table in the corner and sat down.

I hated being in detention, but at least today it wouldn’t be a complete waste of time. I needed to study for Poulsen’s test. As I got my books from my pack, I noticed that my shoulder still hurt a little from when Jack had crammed me into the locker. I tugged on my collar and exposed a bright red scrape. Fortunately, I had gotten my fingers out of the way just in time to not have the door slammed on them. I wondered if anyone would call my mom about the incident.

I hoped not. She had a stupid job she didn’t like and I didn’t want to make her day any worse than it already was.

Just twenty minutes into detention, Ms. Johnson said, “All right, that’s enough. Time to go.”

I scooped my books into my pack and threw it over my shoulder.

“See you tomorrow,” I said to Ms. Johnson.

“See you tomorrow, Michael,” she said pleasantly, as if she looked forward to it.

Outside the cafeteria, the halls were now empty except for the janitorial crew that had moved in and were pushing wide brooms up and down the tiled corridors. I stopped at my locker and grabbed the licorice I’d stowed in there after lunch and had looked forward to all day. I peeled back its wrapper and took a delicious chewy bite. Whoever invented licorice was a genius. I loved licorice almost as much as Rice Krispies squares. I swung my pack over my shoulder, then walked out the south door, glad to finally be going home.

I had just come around the corner of the school when Jack and his posse, Mitchell and Wade, emerged from between two Dumpsters.

Jack grabbed me by the front of my shirt. I dropped my licorice.

“You ratted us out to Dallstrom, didn’t you?” Jack said.

I looked up at him, my eyes twitching like crazy. “I didn’t tell him.”

“Yeah, right, you little chicken.” Jack shoved me backward into a pyracantha bush. As I fell all the way into it, sharp thorns pricked my neck, arms, and legs. The only place that wasn’t stinging was where my backpack protected me.

“You’re going to pay,” Jack said, pointing at me, “big-time.” He turned to Mitchell, who was almost as tall as Jack but not as broad-shouldered or muscular. “Show him what we do to snitchers.”

“I didn’t tell on you,” I said again. “I promise.”

Before I could climb out of the bush, Mitchell pulled me up and thumped me hard on the eye. I saw a bright flash and felt my eye immediately begin to swell. I put my hand over it, trying not to lose my balance.

“Hit him again,” Jack said.

The next fist landed on my nose. It hurt like crazy. I could feel blood running down my lips and chin. My eyes watered. Then Jack walked up and punched me right in the gut. I fell to my knees, unable to breathe. When I could finally fill my lungs with air I began to groan. I couldn't stop blinking.

“He's crying like a baby,” Mitchell said joyfully. “Cry, baby, cry.”

Then came Wade. Wade West had yellow hair and a crooked nose. He was the smallest and ugliest of the three, which is probably why he was the meanest since he had the most to prove. “I say we pants him.” This was a specialty of Wade's. By “pants” he meant to pull off my pants—the ultimate act of humiliation. Last year in eighth grade, Wade had pantsed Ostin behind the school, pulling off his pants and underwear in front of a couple dozen classmates. Ostin had to run home naked from the waist down, something he had never lived down.

“Yeah,” Mitchell agreed, “that'll teach him for ratting us out.”

“No!” I shouted, struggling to my feet. “I didn't tell on you.”

Just then someone shouted, “Leave him alone.”

Taylor Ridley was standing alone near the school door, dressed in her purple and gold cheerleading outfit.

“Hey, check out the cheerleader,” Wade said.

“You're just in time to watch us pants this guy,” Mitchell said.

“Yeah, shake those pom-poms for us,” Jack said, laughing like a maniac. Then he made up his own cheer, which was surprisingly clever for Jack, “Two, four, six, eight, who we gonna cremate?” He laughed again. “Grab him.”

Before I could even try and get away, all three of them grabbed me. Despite that fact that my nose was still bleeding and I could barely see out of one eye, I went wild, squirming against their clamp-like grips. I got one hand loose and hit Jack in the neck, scoring only a dull thud. He responded by thumping me on the ear.

“Come on, you wimps!” he shouted at Mitchell and Wade. “You can’t hold this runt? Get his shirt off.” They pinned me facedown on the ground, the weight of all three of them crushing me into the grass.

“Stupid little nerd,” Mitchell said. “You think you can rat on us and not pay?”

I tried to curl up so they couldn’t take my clothes, but they were too strong. Jack pulled on my shirt until it began to tear.

“You leave him alone or I’ll get Mrs. Shaw!” Taylor shouted. “She’s right inside.” Mrs. Shaw was the cheerleaders’ adviser and taught home economics. She was a soft-spoken, matronly woman and about as scary as a throw pillow. I think we all knew that she wasn’t actually inside or Taylor would have just gotten her in the first place.

“Shut your mouth,” Jack said.

Hearing him talk that way to Taylor infuriated me. “You shut your mouth, you loser,” I said to Jack.

“You need to learn manners, blinky boy.”

“You need mouthwash,” I said.

Jack grabbed me by the hair and pulled my head around. “You’re going to be wishing you’d kept your mouth shut.” He smacked me again on the nose, which sent a shock of pain through my body. At that moment something snapped. I knew I couldn’t hold back much longer.

“Let me go!” I shouted. “I’m warning you.”

“Ooh,” Wade said. “He’s warning us.”

“Yeah, whatcha gonna do?” Mitchell said. “Cry on us?”

“No, he’s gonna wipe his nose on us,” Wade laughed. He pulled off my shoes while Mitchell grabbed my waistband and started tugging at my pants. I was still trying to curl up.

“Stop struggling,” Jack said. “Or we’re going to take everything you got and make you streak home.”

“Leave him alone!” Taylor yelled again.

“Mitch, hurry and pull his pants off,” Wade said.

A surge of anger ran through my body so powerful I couldn’t control it. Suddenly a sharp, electric *ZAP!* pierced the air, like the sound of ice being dropped onto a hot griddle. Jack and his posse screamed out as they all fell to their backs and flopped about on the grass like fish on land.

I rolled over to my side and wiped the blood from my nose with the back of my hand. I pushed myself up, red-faced and angry. I stood above Jack, who was frothing at the mouth. “I told you to leave me alone. If you ever touch me again, I’ll do worse. Do you understand? Or do you want more?” I lifted my hand.

Terror was evident in his eyes. “No. Please don’t.”

I turned and looked at his posse. Both of them were on the ground, quivering and whimpering. In fact, Wade was bawling like a baby and moaning, “It hurts . . . it hurts so bad.”

I walked over to him. “You bet it hurts. And that was just a little one. Next time you bully me, or any of my friends, I’ll triple it.”

As the three of them lay there groaning and quivering I sat back on the ground, pulled on my shoes, and tied them. Then I remembered Taylor.

I looked back over at the door, hoping she had gone inside. She hadn't. And from the expression on her face, I could tell she had seen everything. Bad, bad news. My mother was going to kill me. But there was nothing I could do about that now. I grabbed my backpack and ran home.

5. Hiding the Evidence

By the time I got home my left eye was nearly swollen shut. I set my backpack on the kitchen table then went into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. My eye looked like a ripe plum. There was no way of hiding it from my mother. I got a washcloth and wiped the blood off my nose and chin.

My mother usually got home around 6:30, so I heated up a can of SpaghettiOs for dinner, grabbed the blue ice pack she kept in the freezer for her occasional headaches, then held the ice against my eye while I played video games with one hand. I know I should have been studying for my biology test, but after a day like this one, I just didn't have it in me.

I really didn't want to talk to my mom about my day, so when I heard her key in the door I ran to my room, shut the door, turned out the lights, threw off my shirt, and crawled into bed.

She called for me from the front room. "Michael?" Twenty seconds later she knocked on my door, then opened it. I pretended to be sleeping, but she didn't fall for it.

"Hey, pal, what are you doing in bed?"

"I don't feel good," I said. I pulled the covers over my head.

"What's wrong?"

She turned on my bedroom light and immediately saw my bloody, torn shirt on the floor and the blood on it. "Michael, what happened?" She walked over to my bed. "Michael, look at me."

"I don't want to."

"Michael."

Reluctantly, I pulled the covers down. Her mouth opened a little when she saw my face. “Oh my . . . what happened?”

A lump came to my throat. “Jack and his friends wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“Oh, honey,” she said. She held me for a couple minutes, then she slowly sat back up. “Did it . . . happen?”

I didn’t want to tell her. I didn’t want to upset her more than she already was. “I’m sorry, Mom. I tried not to. But they wouldn’t leave me alone. They were trying to pull my pants off.”

She gently brushed the hair back from my face. “Stupid boys,” she said softly. I could see the worry on her face. “Well, they had it coming, didn’t they?” After a moment she said, “I’m sorry, Michael. I wish I knew what to do.”

“Why won’t they just leave me alone?”

My cheek was twitching and she gently ran her thumb over it.

Then she leaned forward and kissed my forehead. “I wish I knew, son. I wish I knew.”

6. The Morning After

My radio alarm clock went off at the usual time: 7:11. I had my radio set to the *Morning Zoo* show. The hosts, Frankie and Danger Boy, were talking about people who suffered from bananaphobia—the intense fear of bananas.

I gently touched my eye. The swelling had gone down some but it still ached. So did my heart. I felt like I had betrayed my mom and I worried that we'd have to move. Again. The thought of starting over filled me with dread. I couldn't imagine how hard it would be for her. I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. *You look pretty sorry*, I thought. I showered and got dressed, then walked out to the kitchen.

My mother was standing next to the refrigerator dressed in her orange work smock. She was a checker at the local Smith's Food Mart. She was making waffles with strawberry jam and whipped cream. I was glad, not just because I loved waffles, but because it meant she wasn't mad at me.

"How's your eye?" she asked.

"It's okay."

"Come here, let me see." I walked over to her, and she leaned forward to examine it. "That's quite a shiner." She pulled a waffle from the iron. "I made you waffles."

"Thanks."

I sat down at the table, and she brought over a plate. "Would you like orange juice or milk to drink?"

"Can I have chocolate milk?"

"Sure." She went back to the kitchen counter and poured me a glass of milk, then got a can of powdered chocolate from the cupboard and stirred

some in. The sound of the spoon clinking against the glass filled the room. She brought the glass over to the table, then sat down next to me.

“So these boys who were picking on you . . .”

“Jack and his friends.”

“Do I need to call their parents?”

“I don’t think Jack has parents. I think he was spawned.”

She grinned. “What about the other boys?”

“They crawled out of the sewer.”

“So would it help if I called these sewer creatures’ parents?”

I cut a piece of waffle and took a bite. “No. It would just make things worse. Besides, I don’t think they’ll be messing with me anymore.”

“Do you think they’ll tell anyone what happened?”

“No one would believe them anyway.”

“I hope you’re right.” She looked across the table. “How are the waffles?”

“Good, thanks.” I took another bite.

“You’re welcome.” Her voice was pitched with concern. “Did anyone else see what happened?”

I swallowed. “A girl.”

“What girl?”

“She’s in one of my classes. She was telling them to leave me alone when it happened.”

The look of anxiety on her face made my stomach hurt. After a moment, she stood. “Well, I guess we’ll just cross that bridge when we get to it.” She kissed me on the forehead. “I better go. Want a ride to school?”

“No, I’m okay.”

Just then there was a knock. My mom answered the door. Ostin stood in the hallway. “Hello, Mrs. Vey.”

“Good morning, Ostin. You’re looking sharp today.”

Ostin pulled in his stomach. He thought my mother was a “babe,” which made me crazy. Ostin was fifteen years old and girl crazy, which was unfortunate because he was short, chubby, and a geek, which is pretty much all you need to scare girls our age away. I have no doubt that someday he’ll be the CEO of some Fortune 500 company and drive a Ferrari and have girls falling all over themselves to get to him. But he sure didn’t now.

“Thank you, Mrs. Vey,” he said. “Is Michael ready?”

“Just about. Come on in.”

He stepped inside, dwarfed by the size of his backpack.

“Hey, Ostin,” I said.

He looked at my black eye. “Dude, what happened?”

“Jack and his friends jumped me.”

His eyes widened. “Did they pants you?”

“They tried.”

“High school,” my mother said. “You couldn’t pay me a million dollars to go back.” She grabbed her keys and purse. “All right. You boys have a good day. Stay out of trouble.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Vey.”

“See ya, Mom.”

She stopped at the doorway. “Oh, Michael, we’re doing inventory at the store today, so I’ll be late tonight. I’ll probably be home around eight. Just make yourself some mac ’n’ cheese.”

“No problem.”

“You sure you don’t want a ride?”

Ostin almost said something but I spoke first. “We’re fine,” I said.

“Okay, see you later.” She walked out.

“Your mom is so hot,” Ostin said, as he sat down at the table.

“Dude, shut up. She’s my mom.”

He pointed to my face. “So what happened?”

“Jack thought I snitched him out to Dallstrom. So he and his posse jumped me behind the school.”

“Wade,” Ostin said bitterly. “You should have just zapped him.”

I put my hand over his mouth. “Shut up. You know you’re not supposed to know.”

“I know. Sorry.” He looked over at the door. “She’s gone anyway,” he said defensively. His face brightened. “Hey, I got the multimeter from my uncle so we can test you.” Ostin had this idea about measuring how many volts of electricity I could generate, which frankly I was curious about too.

“Cool.”

“Seriously, dude, I don’t know why you hide your power. You could be the most powerful kid at school. Instead you get beat up.”

“Well, Jack and his friends won’t be bothering us anymore.”

Ostin’s face brightened. “Did you do it?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool! Man I wish I had been there to see you hand down the righteous judgment.”

I took another bite. “If you were there, you’d have a black eye too. If Wade didn’t pants you again.”

He frowned at the thought of it. “So does your mom know you used it?”

“Yeah.”

“Did she freak?”

“Yeah. But she was cool about it. She’s worried that someone might find out, but she doesn’t want me to get beat up either. They started it. I just finished it.”

“Speaking of, are you going to finish those waffles?”

“There’s extra in the kitchen.”

“Cool. My mom made gruel for breakfast.”

“What’s gruel?”

“It’s punishment. Really, dude, it tastes like wallpaper paste. I think they feed it to prisoners in Siberian gulags.”

“Why does she make it?”

“Because she ate it when she was a kid. But your mom’s waffles . . . oh, baby. The only thing better than how she looks is her cooking.”

“Dude, just stop it.”

Ostin shook his head. “I was born in the wrong house.” He threw two waffles on a plate and brought them over to the table, where he drowned them in a sea of syrup. “Did anyone else see you do it?”

“Taylor.”

“Taylor Ridley? The cheerleader?”

“Yeah.”

“What did she do?”

“She just stared.”

“Wow. I wish I had been there.” He took a massive bite of waffle, the syrup dripping down his chin. “Did you study for the biology test?”

“A little. In detention. How about you?”

“Don’t need to. It’s all right here.” He pointed to his head. Ostin had a 4.0 grade point average only because the scale didn’t go higher.

If his body matched his brain he’d be Mr. Universe. “Do you have detention today?”

“I have detention for the next four weeks unless you can figure out a way to get me out of it.”

“Maybe you should just shock Dallstrom.”

“Only in my dreams.”

Just then the front door opened and my mom leaned in. “Michael, can you give me a hand?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Just come outside.”

“Need some help, Mrs. Vey?” Ostin asked.

“You stay put, Ostin. I need to talk to Michael alone.”

Ostin frowned. I got up and walked outside, shutting the door behind me.

“What’s wrong?”

“I left the car’s dome light on all night and the battery’s dead. Can you give me a jump?”

“Sure.”

I followed her out of the building and across the parking lot to our car, a ten-year-old Toyota Corolla. She looked around to make sure no one was watching, then she climbed inside and popped the hood. I lifted it the rest of the way up, then grabbed the car battery’s terminals. “Go ahead,” I said.

The starter motor clicked until I pulsed (which is what I call what I do, pulse or surge) and the engine fired up. I let go of the battery.

Mom raced the engine for a moment, then she stuck her head out the window. “Thanks, honey.”

I shut the hood. “Sure.”

“Have a good day.”

She pulled out of the parking lot as I went back inside. Ostin was still at the table finishing his waffles.

“What was that about?” he asked, his mouth full.

“Car battery was dead.”

“And you started it up?”

“Yeah.”

“That is so cool.”

“At least my electricity’s good for something.”

“It’s good as Jack-repellant,” Ostin said cheerfully.

I looked at him and frowned. “Stop eating. We’re going to be late.”

He quickly shoved in two more bites, then stood. I threw my pack over my shoulder, then Ostin and I walked the five blocks to school.

Meridian High School was the fourth school I had been to since we moved to Idaho five years earlier. On the first day of high school, my mother had said to me, “Don’t get in trouble—and don’t hurt anyone,” which I’m sure would have sounded ridiculous to anyone who didn’t know my secret. I mean, I’m shorter than almost everyone at school, including the girls, and I never started problems, except by being small and looking vulnerable.

When I was in the sixth grade at Churchill Junior High, a bunch of wrestlers put me in the lunchroom garbage can and rolled me across the cafeteria. It was chicken à la king day and I was covered with rice and yellow gravy with carrots. It took five minutes before I couldn’t take it anymore and I “went off,” as my mother called it.

I wasn’t as good at controlling it back then, and one of the boys was taken to the hospital. The faculty and administration went nuts.

Teachers questioned me, and the principal and the school police officer searched me. They thought I had a stun gun or Taser or something. They went through my coat and pants pockets, and even the garbage can but, of course, they found nothing. They ended their investigation by concluding

that the boys had touched a power cord or something. None of the wrestlers got in trouble for what they had done and all was forgotten. A few months later my mom and I moved again.

7. The Cheerleader's Story

If you've ever had a black eye you'll know what my day was like. Everyone just stared at me like I was a freak or something. By the end of the day I was walking with my head down, and my eyes partially covered by a copy of the school paper—the *Meridian Warwhoop*. Still, the day wasn't all bad. I didn't see Dallstrom once, and there was no sign of Jack or his friends. I figured I had probably scared them off for at least a few days.

As I walked into biology, my last class of the day, I noticed Taylor Ridley staring at me. I ignored her gaze and sat down.

“Hey,” she said. “Are you okay?”

I didn't look at her. As usual my tics started.

She leaned toward me. “Michael.”

I didn't even know that she knew my name.

The tardy bell rang and Mr. Poulsen began walking up and down the rows of desks, handing out our tests.

“People, today's test comprises one-fifth of your final grade, so you don't want to rush it. I want complete silence. N'er a word. You know the penalty for cheating, so I won't elaborate, except to remind you that it's an automatic F and an unpleasant visit to Mr. Dallstrom.” (Was there any other kind? I thought.) Mr. Poulsen walked to the front of the classroom. “When you're done with your tests bring them to me, then go back to your desks and sit quietly.”

I could see Ostin squirming in front of me, happy as a pig in mud. He loved tests. Lived for them. Sometimes, for fun, he'd download them from the Internet and quiz himself. Clearly something was wrong with him. I pulled out my pencil box and began.

1. Which definition best describes a chromatid?
 - a. Protein/DNA complex making the chromosome
 - b. Molecules of DNA with specific proteins responsible in eukaryotes for storage and transmission of genetic information
 - c. Five kinds of proteins forming complexes with eukaryotic DNA
 - d. Each of a pair of identical DNA molecules after DNA replication, joined at the centromere

D, I thought. D? Or was it A? I was mulling over my answer when a folded piece of paper landed on my desk. I unfolded it.

How did you do that?

I glanced around to see who had thrown it. Taylor was looking at me.

I wrote, *Do what?*

I looked up at Poulsen, who was at his desk reading a book, then threw the note back. Within seconds the note was on my desk again.

You know. I saw you do something to those boys.

I sent her another note.

I didn't do anything.

Taylor wrote back.

You can trust me.

I was writing another denial when I heard Poulsen clear his throat.

I looked up. He was standing at the top of my row, staring at me.

“Mr. Vey. Those notes wouldn’t have something to do with the test we’re working on?”

I swallowed. “No, sir.”

“Then you picked the wrong time to share your feelings with Miss Ridley.”

I blushed while the class laughed. He walked toward me. I was blinking like crazy. “I think I was quite explicit about the rules. Hand me that note.” I looked down at the paper. I couldn’t give it to him. If he read it aloud everyone would know.

“Wait,” Taylor said. “He didn’t do anything. I was the one passing notes.”

He looked at Taylor and his expression changed from stern disciplinarian to gentle educator. I think even he had a crush on her.

“What did you say, Miss Ridley?”

“I wrote the notes, not Michael.”

He looked at Taylor in disbelief. She was the model student, incapable of such a shameful act. Then, while he was looking at her, Taylor did the strangest thing. She smiled at Poulsen with a confident smile, then cocked her head to one side and narrowed her eyes. Suddenly Poulsen looked confused, like a man who had just been awakened from a nap. He blinked several times, then looked at Taylor and smiled. “Excuse me, what was I saying?”

“You said we have forty minutes left on our tests,” Taylor said.

He rubbed his forehead. “Right. Thank you, Taylor.” He turned back toward the class. “Everyone keep at it. You have forty minutes left.” He walked back to his desk while everyone in our class looked back and forth at each other in amazement. I couldn’t believe what had just happened. I looked back at Taylor.

“You can trust me,” she mouthed.

It took me the whole class to finish the test. In fact, I ran out of time on the last three questions and just randomly circled letters.

Ostin had finished the whole thing in less than fifteen minutes and strutted to the front of the room to turn in his test, unaware that the rest of the class was staring daggers at his back. For the rest of the period I could hear him sneaking cheese puffs from his backpack.

After the bell rang, Ostin and I walked out to our lockers.

“Man, that test was cake,” Ostin said. “I can’t wait for the next one.”

“You’re a freak,” I said.

Suddenly Taylor grabbed my arm. “Michael, we need to talk.”

“No we don’t,” I said. I kept walking, leaving her standing there.

Ostin looked at me in amazement. “Dude, that was Taylor Ridley you just brushed off.”

I looked at him. “So?”

He smiled. “That was so cool.”

Taylor ran in front of me and stopped. She looked at Ostin. “Excuse us, please.”

“Sure,” Ostin said, looking thrilled that Taylor had spoken to him.

After he’d taken a few steps back she turned to me. “Please.”

“I can’t,” I replied.

“I need to know,” Taylor said. “I really, really need to know.”

I looked at her, thinking. “What did you do to Poulsen?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, mimicking what I’d written to her on the note.

“You did *something*,” I said, “I saw it.”

“Really? Well, so did you.”

“Nothing I can tell you about.”

“Michael, please. It’s important.” She grimaced. “I’m begging.”

“Dude, she’s begging,” Ostin said, forgetting that he wasn’t supposed to be listening.

Taylor turned to him. “Excuse me,” she said sharply.

Ostin wilted beneath her gaze. “Sorry.” This time he crossed to the opposite side of the hall.

I looked at her for a moment then said, “I’d get killed for telling you.”

“No one will ever know. I promise.” She crossed her chest with her finger. “Cross my heart.”

I looked over at Ostin, who was still pretending not to listen. He shook his head.

Taylor looked at him, then back at me and sighed. “Michael, I *really* need to know. I promise, I’ll never tell anyone.” She leaned in closer. “I’ll even tell you *my secret*.” She just stood there, staring at me the way Ostin stared at jelly doughnuts. Then she put her hand on my arm. “Please, Michael. It’s more important than you can possibly imagine.”

She looked so desperate I wasn’t sure what to do. Finally I said, “I couldn’t tell you here anyway.”

“We can go to my place,” she said quickly. “I live just down the street. No one’s home.”

Ostin looked at me in amazement. I could guess what he was thinking. *Dude, Taylor Ridley just invited you to her house!*

“I can’t,” I said. “I have after-school detention.”

“That’s okay, I’ll wait for you,” she said eagerly.

“Don’t you have cheerleading or something?”

“Only on Mondays and Wednesdays. And Fridays if there’s a game.” She looked deeply into my eyes. “Please.”

Saying no to the girl you have a crush on is hard enough, especially when she’s begging, but I had also run out of excuses. I exhaled loudly in surrender. “Where do you want to meet?”

Taylor smiled. “I’ll just go with you.”

“To detention?”

“I don’t think they’ll try to keep me out, do you?”

“I don’t know. No one ever tries to get *into* detention. It’s like breaking into jail.”

Taylor smiled. “Then I guess we’ll find out.”

“Hey,” said Ostin, who had inched his way back into our conversation.

“What about me?”

Taylor looked at him. “What about you?”

“I’m Michael’s best friend. Ostin,” he said, eagerly putting out his hand. Taylor just looked at him.

“He’s my friend,” I said.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I want to come with you guys.”

“We can trust him,” I said.

She looked him over, then turned back to me. “Sorry, but I can’t.”

I looked at Ostin and shrugged. “Sorry, man.”

He frowned. “All right. See you guys later.”

As Ostin walked away, Taylor turned to me. “Let’s go, you delinquent.”

We walked down the hall together, something I never thought would happen in a million years. I wondered if Taylor might be afraid to be seen walking with me—like her popularity quotient might fall a point or two (I wasn’t sure how that worked), but she didn’t seem to care. She must have said “Hi” about a hundred times between my locker and detention. As usual I felt invisible.

As we walked into the lunchroom, Ms. Johnson looked at Taylor quizzically. Taylor was one of those students who was always the teacher’s pet: perfect citizenship, always got her homework done, raised her hand to speak, never a cause of trouble. I once overheard a teacher say, “If only I could have a classroom of Taylors.”

“Do you need something, Taylor?” Ms. Johnson asked.

“No, Ms. Johnson. I’m here for detention.”

“I’m surprised to hear that.” Ms. Johnson looked down at her clipboard. “I don’t have you on my list.”

“I know. I didn’t get in trouble or anything. I’m just waiting for my friend Michael.”

Ms. Johnson nodded. “That’s very kind of you, being supportive of a friend, but detention isn’t a place to hang out.”

Taylor just looked at her with her big, soft brown eyes. “Please? I really think I can help him change his ways.”

I turned and looked at her.

Ms. Johnson smiled. “Well, if you really want to help, I don’t see why not. But you can’t sit together. We can’t have talking.”

Taylor flashed a smile. “That’s okay, Ms. Johnson. I’ve got a lot of homework to catch up on.” She waved to me. “Be good.” She sat down at Ms. Johnson’s table, grinning at me.

I’m pretty sure that Taylor was the happiest person to ever go to detention. Frankly, I wasn’t hating it too much myself. I couldn’t believe that the best-looking girl at school was in detention waiting for me. The lunchroom was at least ten times more crowded than the day before, which meant that there was either a sudden outbreak of misbehaving, or Mr. Dallstrom had had a bad day. I was about to sit at the end of a long table near the back wall of the cafeteria when someone said, “Not there, tickerhead.”

I looked up. Cody Applebaum, a six-foot ninth grader, was walking toward the table, sneering at me. “That’s my side of the table.”

I had no idea what a tickerhead was. “Whatever,” I said. I walked to the opposite end of the table and sat down. I opened my algebra book, unfolded the day’s worksheet, and began doing my homework. About five minutes into my studying something hard hit me in the head. I looked up at Cody, who was laughing. He had a handful of marbles.

“Ow! Knock it off,” I said, rubbing my head.

“Owww, knock it off,” he mimicked. “Puny wimp. Go tell your mama.”

Sometimes I felt like I was wearing a sign that said pick on me.

I went back to my book. A few seconds later another marble hit me in the head. I looked up. Cody was now leaning against the wall on the back two legs of his chair. He raised his fist and bared his teeth like an angry baboon.

“Stop it,” I said.

“Make me.”

I went back to my studying. Less than a minute later another marble hit me in the head. As I looked up I noticed a metal trim that ran along the wall where Cody was leaning.

I don’t know why I did it—maybe I was still feeling great from finally putting Jack in his place, maybe it was the obnoxious smirk on Applebaum’s face, or, maybe it was that I was showing off for Taylor.

But, most likely, it was the culmination of too many years of being bullied. Whatever the reason, I was done with playing the victim.

With my hand below the table I touched the trim behind me and pulsed. Cody let out a loud yelp and fell back off his chair, smacking his head against the wall, then the floor. When Ms. Johnson stood up to see what had happened, Applebaum was lying on his back rubbing the back of his head.

“Cody! Quit screwing around.”

He looked up from the ground. “Something shocked me.”

“Right, Cody. I saw you leaning back on your chair,” Ms. Johnson said. “One more outburst like that and I’m adding two days to your detention.”

Cody climbed back into his chair. “Sorry, Ms. Johnson.”

I looked over at Taylor. She was looking at me, slowly shaking her head. I shrugged.

Ms. Johnson let us out early again. On the way out of the cafeteria, Taylor said, “Nice spending time with you, Ms. Johnson.”

“You too, Taylor.” Ms. Johnson glanced over at me. “Hopefully your behavior will rub off on some of the other students.”

“I hope so,” she said.

Taylor laughed when we were out of the cafeteria. “Stick with me, Vey, maybe my behavior will rub off on you.”

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically. Actually I was happy to stick with her, but for other reasons.

As we walked down the hall Taylor asked, “What did you do to Cody?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Same ‘nothing’ you did to Jack and his gang?”

I grinned. “Maybe.”

“Whatever you’re doing, you shouldn’t do it in public like that.”

“You should talk. Besides, Cody started it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Taylor said.

I turned to her. “It does to me. I’m sick of being picked on and doing nothing about it. It’s like having a racecar you have to leave parked in the garage all the time. Why even have it?” I opened the door for her, and we walked out of the school.

“I know. But if you keep doing it, someone’s going to figure it out.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

We walked toward the back of the schoolyard. “Where do you live?” I asked.

“It’s just through that fence over there and two houses down. So, tell me about the other day when Jack was picking on you.”

“You have to first tell me what you did to Poulsen.”

Taylor nodded. “Okay. I’ll tell you when we get to my house.”

Taylor’s house was a tan rambler with plastic pink flamingoes in the front yard and a small grove of aspens on the side. She took a key from her pocket and unlocked the door.

“No one’s home,” she said. She stepped inside, and I followed her.

The house was tidy and nice, bigger than our apartment, but not by much. There was a large wood-framed picture of her family above the living room fireplace. She had two older brothers. Everyone in Taylor’s family had blond hair and blue eyes except Taylor.

“Where’s your family?”

“My parents are at work. My brothers are in college. I usually only see them on weekends.”

“Where do your parents work?”

“My mom works for a travel agency that does educational tours for high school students. My father’s a police officer.” Taylor turned on the lights and led me to the kitchen. “Want some juice or something?”

“No thanks.”

“Go ahead and sit down.”

I sat down at the kitchen bar while she looked inside the fridge.

I put my hand over my right eye, which was fluttering like a moth’s wing.

“How about some lemonade?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She poured us both a glass then sat down next to me. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why do you blink like that?”

I flushed. “I have Tourette’s syndrome.”

“Tourette’s syndrome? You mean, like those people who shout out swear words for no reason?”

“That’s Tourette’s, but I don’t do that. I do other things.”

“Like blinking?”

“Blinking. Sometimes I make gulping noises. Sometimes I make faces.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “No one really knows why. Tourette’s is a neurological thing, so it can affect any part of my body.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Sometimes.”

She thought it over. “Is it okay that I’m asking you about this?”

I’m not trying to embarrass you. I just thought, if we’re going to be friends, I should know.”

What she said made me happy. *If we’re going to be friends . . .*

“Yeah. It’s okay.”

Taylor stood. "Let's sit in the family room. You can bring your drink." We walked into the next room, then sat down next to each other on the sofa. I took a drink of lemonade and puckered. "Wow. That's sour."

"My mom must have made it. She makes it really tart." Taylor took a sip. "Yep, Mom."

I set down my glass.

"So," she said, lacing her fingers together, "are you going to tell me what you did to those boys?"

"You said you'd tell me your secret first."

Taylor smiled nervously. "I know I did, it's just . . ." She looked at me with her beautiful brown eyes. "Please. I promise I'll tell you. It's just easier if you go first."

There was something about Taylor that made me feel like I could trust her. "Okay," I said. "What did you see?"

"I heard a loud zap. Then I saw Jack and his friends rolling on the ground like they had been tased."

I shook my head. "That's pretty much what happened."

"How did you tase them?"

As I thought over how much I wanted to share, Taylor said, "My dad has a Taser. He also has a stun gun. He showed me how they work."

I wasn't sure how much to tell her. My mother had made me promise to never tell anyone about my electricity, but we had never talked about what to do if someone already knew. Or at least thought they did. "I don't know if I should say," I said.

Taylor leaned closer and touched my arm. "Michael, I understand. I really do. I've never told anyone my secret. But I'm tired of keeping this to

myself. Aren't you?" Her eyes were wide with sincerity.

I slowly nodded. Ostin was the only person I'd ever told and telling him had been an incredible relief—like a hundred pounds falling off my shoulders. I slowly breathed out. "You know when people rub their feet on the carpet and build up electricity, then touch someone to shock them?"

"Static electricity."

"Right. When I was little I would touch people and it would shock them like that. Except I didn't have to be on carpet. I could be on anything, and I didn't have to rub my feet. Only the shock was much worse. Sometimes people screamed. It got so bad that my mom made me wear rubber gloves. As I got older, it got more powerful. What I did to those boys was nothing compared to what I could have done."

Taylor set down her lemonade. "So you can control it?"

"Mostly. Sometimes it's hard."

"What does it feel like when you shock?"

"To me or them?"

She grinned. "You. I can guess how it feels to them."

"It's like a sneeze. It just kind of builds up, then blows."

"Can you do it more than once?"

"Yes. But I can only do it so many times before I start to lose energy. It takes a few minutes to build it up again."

"Do you have to touch someone to shock them?"

"Yes. Unless they're touching metal, like Cody was today."

She nodded. "That was actually pretty cool. Do you ever shock yourself?"

“No.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. Electric eels don’t shock themselves.” I took another small sip of the lemonade and puckered.

“You don’t have to drink it,” Taylor said. “I won’t be offended or anything.”

“It’s okay.” I set the glass down. “Your turn. What did you do to Poulsen?”

A wide smile crossed her lips. “I rebooted him.”

“You what?”

“You know, like rebooting a computer. I reboot people. I think it’s an electric thing, too. The brain is just a bunch of electrical signals. I can somehow scramble them.”

“That’s weird.”

“You’re calling me weird?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m not saying you’re weird.”

“Well, I am. And so are you. I don’t think there’s anyone else in the world like us.”

“Unless they’re hiding it like us. I mean, I sat next to you in class and I never knew.”

“That’s true.”

“When did you first notice that you were different?” I asked.

“I think I was around seven. I was lying in bed one night under the covers when I noticed that there was a bluish-greenish glow coming from my

body.”

“You have a glow?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s just faint. You can only see it in the dark and if you look closely.”

“I glow, too,” I said. Hearing that she had the same glow made me feel good—like I wasn’t so different. Or alone.

“That summer I was playing wizard with some friends and I cast a spell, only they fell to the ground and started to cry. At first I thought they were just pretending. But they weren’t. They couldn’t remember what they were doing.”

“That’s why Poulsen couldn’t remember what he was doing,” I said.

She smiled. “Yeah. It comes in handy sometimes.”

“Does it hurt the person you reboot?”

She seemed embarrassed. “I don’t know. It’s not like I do it all the time. Want me to do it to you?”

“No. Do you want me to shock you?”

“No.” She looked at me seriously. “You know, Michael, my parents don’t even know about this. Do you have any idea how good it feels to finally tell someone?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

She smiled. “Yeah, I guess you would.” She lay back into the cushion. “So your parents know?”

“My mother does. My father passed away when I was eight.”

“I’m sorry.” Her expression grew more serious. “So what does your mother think of it?”

“I think it scares her. If she knew I was talking to you she’d be really upset.”

“She won’t hear it from me,” Taylor said. “I wish I could tell my parents. I’ve tried a few times, but whenever I ask to talk to them they get nervous, like I’m going to tell them I’ve done something wrong. I guess I’m just afraid of how they’ll react.”

“You should tell them,” I said.

“I know. Someday I will.”

Taylor leaned forward and said in a softer but more excited tone, “There’s something else I can do. Want to see it?”

“Sure.”

She patted the sofa cushion next to her. “Come closer.”

I scooted closer until our bodies nearly touched. I started gulping but stopped myself. “This isn’t going to hurt, right?”

“No.” She leaned toward me until we were touching. “Now think of a number between one and a million.”

“One and a million? Okay.” I thought of the last four digits of my phone number.

“Just keep thinking of the number.” She reached over and took my hand. Suddenly a big smile came across her face. “Think of the number, silly, not me.”

“What, you’re reading my mind?” I asked jokingly. It wouldn’t take a mind reader to know what I was thinking—the most beautiful girl at school was holding my hand. I focused on my number again.

“Three thousand, nine hundred and eight-nine,” she said.

I looked at her in astonishment. “How did you do that?”

“I don’t know. But I’m pretty sure that it’s part of the same rebooting thing. I mean, it’s all about electricity, right? Our thoughts are just electricity firing, so when I touch you, your thoughts show up in my brain as well—same projector, different screen.”

Her explanation made sense. “So you can really read minds?”

“Yes, but not without touching. If I were to put my forehead against yours I could see even better.”

I wouldn’t mind that, I thought, forgetting that we were still holding hands. A big smile came across her face. I blushed and let go of her hand. “So all you need to do is touch someone?”

She nodded. “I’ve even been able to read people’s minds if they’re touching metal—like the way you shocked Cody.” She leaned back again. “So what do we do now?”

“First, we need to promise never to reveal each other’s power.”

“We already did that,” she said.

“Right. Second, I think we need to stick together.”

She looked at me with a funny expression. I’m glad she wasn’t touching me. After a moment she said. “That’s a good idea. We should start a club.”

“A club? With just the two of us?”

“Unless you know someone else like us.”

“Ostin should be in our club. He could come in handy.”

“Who’s Ostin?”

“He’s my friend. You met him at my locker. He sits in front of me in biology.”

“The know-it-all kid.”

I nodded. “He’s my best friend.”

“Does he have powers?”

“No. But he knows a lot about science and electricity. He’s really smart. Like mad scientist smart. His mother told me when he was only six years old, their DVD player broke. Before his father could take it in for repair, Ostin had taken it apart and fixed it.”

“He’s not too smart socially,” Taylor observed.

“That’s a different kind of smart.”

“But can he keep a secret? Because no one can know about this.”

“He’s kept my secret since I told him.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Almost three years. Besides, who is he going to tell? I’m his only friend.”

Taylor didn’t look completely convinced but she nodded anyway.

“All right, he can be in our club.”

“We’ll need to come up with a name,” I said. “Every club has a name.”

“You’re right. How about . . . the Power Team.”

I frowned. “No, too boring. How about, the Electric Eels.”

“Yuck,” she said. “Have you ever seen one of those? They look like fat snakes with acne. Besides, shocking people is your thing. You could call

yourself Eel Man.”

I didn't really care for the name, though I did like that she referred to me as a man. “And you could call yourself the Human Reset Button.”

She shook her head. “Let's just stick with our real names.”

“Okay. Besides, we don't have to come up with something right now. Ostin's good at this kind of thing. He'll have some good ideas.”

We sat a moment in silence.

Taylor stood. “Would you like some more lemonade?”

“No, I'm good.”

She looked at the clock above the television set and groaned. “My mom will be home in another half hour. You better go. My parents are kind of strict. I'm not allowed to have boys over when they're not here.”

I stood. “I need to get home anyway.”

She walked me to the door. “Thanks for coming over.”

“You're welcome. When should we get together again?” I tried not to sound too eager. “For our club.”

“When's good for you?”

“How about tomorrow night?”

“I can't, there's a basketball game. Aren't you going?”

“Right. I forgot.” The truth was, I hadn't ever gone to a school game.

“How could you forget? It's the regional championship.”

“I've just had a lot going on lately.”

“How about Saturday?”

“Saturday’s good during the day. But at night my mom and I are going to dinner for my birthday.”

“Saturday’s your birthday?”

I nodded. “But we’re really celebrating on Monday, since my mom has to work all day Saturday.”

Taylor said, “My birthday is Sunday.”

“Really? That’s a coincidence.”

Her brow furrowed. “Maybe it’s not. We were born on nearly the same day and we both have electrical powers. Think about it. Maybe it had something to do with the stars being in alignment or something.”

It may sound strange, but I had never considered why I had electrical powers any more than I had wondered about where my Tourette’s had come from. “If that’s the case then there would be tens of thousands of people like us,” I said.

Taylor shrugged. “Maybe there are.”

“I doubt it,” I said. “Or we would have at least heard of a few of them. I mean, someone pops a zit and it ends up on the Internet.”

“You’re right.” She thought some more. “Were you born here?”

I shook my head. “I was born in Pasadena, California. How about you?”

“I don’t know. I was adopted.”

Now I understood why Taylor looked so different from the rest of her family. “So, we’ll get together Saturday?” I asked.

“Sure. But first I need to make sure my parents don’t have plans.

They've been on my back lately for being gone too much. I'll let you know."

"Great."

She opened the door for me. "Bye, Michael."

"See ya, Taylor. Thanks for the lemonade."

"You're welcome. Talk to you tomorrow."

After she shut the door I took off running. I had just formed an exclusive club with Taylor Ridley. I didn't need to run. I could have floated the whole way home.

8. The Multimeter

As soon as I got inside the apartment building I knocked on Ostin's door. He opened, his face bent in disapproval. "So how's the cheerleader?" he asked snidely.

"I know you're mad you got left out."

"What did you do, make out?"

"Shut up, Ostin. Do you want to come over or not?"

It took him two seconds to get over it. "Yeah, wait." He ran back into his apartment, then returned carrying a small yellow and black device and a notepad and pen. "Let's start our tests."

As he was shutting his door, Ostin's mom shouted, "Where you going, Ostin?"

"I'm going to Michael's."

"Be careful," she said.

Ostin looked at me and shrugged. His mom was a little protective. Actually she was a lot protective. I'm surprised she didn't make him wear a helmet to clogging.

"We're having dinner soon. Ask Michael if he wants to eat with us."

He looked at me. "Want to eat with us? We're having fish sticks."

"No thanks." I hate fish sticks.

He turned back. "He's not going to eat with us."

"Dinner will be ready by seven. Don't be late."

“Okay.”

He shut his door while I walked down the hall and unlocked my apartment. As soon as we were inside, Ostin opened his notebook and clicked his pen. “All right,” he said, using the tone of voice he used when he was doing something scientific. “First things first. Today is Thursday, the fourteenth of April. How are you feeling?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“I want our experiment to be accurate, so try to be as specific as possible. Are you feeling more or less electric than usual?”

“I don’t ever feel electric,” I said.

“Okay. Usual,” he said, scribbling in his notebook. “Weather is fair.

I checked the barometer earlier and it’s one thousand seventeen millibars and humidity is negligible.” He brought the multimeter over to me, which looked a little like a fat calculator with cables attached.

“Okay, clamp these on your fingers.”

I looked at the clamps. “I’m not going to put those on my fingers. They’re sharp.”

“Do you want this to be accurate or not?”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay.” I clamped the copper leads around my fingers. They bit into my skin.

“Now, don’t do anything until I tell you.”

“Just hurry. These things hurt.”

“When I say ‘go’ I want you to pulse with all your power. Five, four, three, two . . . wait.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. The screen on this thing just went blank.” He pushed some buttons. “Okay. Four, three, two, one, *go!*”

I surged as hard as I could. The snap and crackle of electricity filled the room and there was a spark from my fingers to the clamps.

“Holy moley,” Ostin said. He set down the multimeter and began writing in his notebook. “You produced eight hundred and sixty-four volts.”

“That sounds like a lot.”

“Dude, that’s more than a full-grown electric eel. You could paralyze a crocodile with that.” His eyes narrowed. “You could kill someone.”

The way he said that bothered me. “I’m done,” I said. I was taking the clips off my fingers when the front door opened and my mother stepped in. Ostin quickly hid the machine behind his back. I looked at her in surprise. “Mom. What are you doing here?”

“I live here,” she said, looking at us suspiciously.

“But you said you were working late.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“No, I . . . I’m just surprised.”

“I had a headache, so they let me come home early.” Her eyes darted back and forth between us. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“You were doing something. What do you have behind your back, Ostin?”

Ostin froze. “Nothing.” His “nothing” sounded more like a question than a statement.

My mother walked up to him and put out her hand. “Let’s see it.”

He slowly took the multimeter from behind his back and handed it to my mom. She examined the device, then looked up at him.

“What does it do?”

He swallowed. I was hoping he’d make something up—calculate algorithms or something.

“It measures voltage.”

“Voltage? You mean electricity?” She looked perplexed. “Why would you . . .” She stopped and looked at me. I could see anger change her countenance. “How long has Ostin known?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know. A while.”

“Thirty-four months and nine days,” Ostin said.

Shut up, I thought.

My mother handed the multimeter back to Ostin. “You need to go home now, Ostin,” she said. “I need to speak to Michael.”

“Okay, Mrs. Vey,” he said, eager to get out of our house. “Have a good night.”

Run, you wuss, I thought.

After the door shut, my mother looked at me for what seemed like a year. Then she said, “Come here.” I followed her over to the couch. “Sit.”

I sat and she sat next to me. For a moment she just held her head in her hands. The silence was excruciating. Finally she looked up.

“Michael, I don’t know what to say to you. Do you know how hard this has been, moving away from our home and everyone we know in California, to

come to a new city just so that no one would find out about you? I gave up a good-paying job at a law firm to be a checker at a supermarket.”

I lowered my head. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

She crossed her arms at her chest. “No, sorry doesn’t cut it. Who else knows about this?”

“The boys yesterday. And Taylor.”

“Who’s Taylor?”

“The cheerleader who saw me.”

“Did you see her at school today?”

“Yes.”

“Did she ask you about what happened?”

I swallowed. “I went to her house.”

My mother’s eyes widened. “Please don’t tell me that you talked to her about what happened.”

I slowly nodded.

She threw up her hands. “Michael, what were you thinking? Now we may have to pick up and start over again. I am so tired, I don’t know if I can do it.”

My eyes welled up. “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to . . .”

“Michael, it doesn’t always matter what you mean to do, it matters what you do. Please, explain to me, why would you risk everything and tell them?”

For a few moments I just sat there silently. Then, suddenly, it all came out. “I’m sick of having everyone at school think I’m just some wimpy kid who makes funny faces and noises. I’m sick of being bullied all the time. And I’m sick of hiding who I am. “Ostin is the only friend I have. He doesn’t care about my Tourette’s or my electricity. He just likes me for me.” I looked up into her eyes. “I just want someone to know the truth about me and still be my friend.”

She put her head down. Then she took my hand. “Michael, I know it’s not easy being different. I don’t blame you for feeling this way. It’s just that most people can’t understand your special gift.”

“You think this is a gift, Mom? It’s not. It’s just another reminder that I’m a freak.”

“Michael, don’t say that.”

“Why? That’s what they call me.”

“Who calls you that?”

“The kids at summer camp last June. They surrounded me and said, ‘Let’s see what the freak does next.’ And they don’t even know about my electricity, they were just talking about all my ticking and blinking.”

Her eyes welled up with tears. After a moment she asked softly, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you have enough to worry about.”

She looked like she didn’t know what to say.

“I’m just tired of everyone picking on me all the time for no reason except they think they can. I’m tired of knowing I could stop them and I don’t. You know who I hate more than them for picking on me? I hate myself for letting them.” I looked into her eyes. “I’m tired of being a nobody.”

My mother wiped her eyes. “You’re not a nobody, Michael. You’re a great kid with a big heart.” She kissed my forehead, then said, “I owe you an apology. I was wrong when I said that it doesn’t matter what you meant to do. Sometimes we can’t know what’s right. We can only know that we meant to do the right thing—and that we had the right reason.”

“How do we know if it’s the right reason?”

“If we make love our reason we may veer off course sometimes but we’ll never be lost.” She put her arm around me. “Michael, I’m sorry for getting mad at you. I was just scared. Ostin’s been a good friend, hasn’t he?”

I nodded. “The best.”

“And he’s kept your secret?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m glad you told him. It’s best to not keep secrets from our best friends.” She crossed her arms at her chest. “Now tell me about this cheerleader.”

“I think she’s like me.”

She smiled. “She likes you?”

“No, Mom, she’s *like* me.”

“What do you mean?”

“She has powers too.”

My mom’s expression changed. “What?”

“She showed me. It’s been her secret too. She even glows like me.”

“She can . . . shock?”

“Sort of. It’s like she can shock people’s brains. And she can read minds.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “She showed me.”

She looked down for a moment, then softly said, “He said there might be others . . .”

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing. It’s nothing. So, is she cute?”

“She’s the cutest girl in the whole school.”

“Work that.” She smiled at me. “Why don’t you go see if Ostin wants to go to Baskin-Robbins with us.”

I smiled. “Okay, Mom.” I stood and started toward the door.

“Michael.”

I turned back.

“When I start thinking about all the hard things in my life, I think of you and I feel lucky to be me. I could not be more proud of you. And I know your father would be just as proud.”

I walked back and hugged her. “I love you, Mom.”

Her eyes moistened. “I love you more every day. Never forget that.”

That night I had a double-decker ice cream at Baskin-Robbins—Bubble Gum and Pralines and Cream. Ostin had a triple-decker. My mother didn’t have anything. She just kept looking at me and smiling.

9. A New Crowd

The next day I didn't see Ostin until lunch. I found him sitting where we always sat, at a small round table near the vending machines. It was pizza day and he'd gotten an extra slice. He waved to me. "Michael." I sat down at the table.

"Your eye's looking a lot better," he said.

"Thanks. Where were you this morning?"

"I had a dentist appointment."

"How'd it go?"

"It was just a checkup. Two cavities."

"Probably all the ice cream you ate last night," I joked. "At my last appointment I had three. I can only chew sugarless gum now." I opened my carton of milk. "So we're starting a club."

"Who?"

"Us. You, me, and Taylor."

"What kind of club?"

"It's for people with . . ." I hesitated. I hadn't told him about Taylor.

"Unique abilities like mine."

"Excellent. So why Taylor?"

"I don't know. Why you?"

"Because of my intellect, of course."

"Well, there's more to Taylor than meets the eyes."

“And with her there’s a lot to meet the eye. Her super power can be that she’s super good-looking,” Ostin said.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said.

“What’s the club called?”

“We haven’t named it yet. Something about electricity. I was hoping you’d come up with something.”

“I’ll put my computer on it,” he said, tapping the side of his head.

He took a bite of pizza. Before he’d finished chewing he said, “Hey, we get our tests back in biology today.”

“Can’t wait,” I said sarcastically.

“How’d you do?”

“I don’t know. B maybe. If I’m lucky.” I didn’t have to ask him what he was getting. We both knew he got an A. He could teach the class.

Just then one of the cheerleaders walked up to our table. There was a basketball game today and the cheerleaders always wore their outfits on game day. “Is this seat taken?”

Ostin’s eyes were as wide as glazed doughnuts. “No.”

“Good.” She dragged the chair off to a nearby table.

“Any time, babe!” Ostin shouted after her. “Come back if you need another one. Got plenty of ’em. I’m your chair connection.” He turned to me. “Did you see that? She spoke to me.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s going somewhere.”

He took another couple of bites of pizza. “So what happened with your mom last night? First she’s mad as a hornet and then she’s taking us out to

ice cream.”

“She’s just afraid that someone will find out about me. That’s why we moved from California, you know. And our last apartment.”

“Yeah.”

“You haven’t told anyone, have you?”

“Never.”

“Good. Because I’d have to shock you if you did.”

He looked at me anxiously. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Like an electric eel.”

He stopped chewing.

I punched his arm. “Relax, I’m kidding.” Then I added, “Sort of.”

Just then Taylor walked up to our table. She was also wearing her cheerleader outfit. She looked as pretty as ever. I could feel my tongue knot up, and I started blinking like crazy.

“Hi, Michael. Is this seat taken?”

“No, you can take it,” Ostin said eagerly. “I’ll even carry it for you.”

She looked at him. “No, I mean, may I sit here?”

“Sure,” I said. I couldn’t believe she wanted to sit by us. She turned to Ostin, who looked like he might hyperventilate with excitement. “Dallas, isn’t it?”

“Ostin.”

“Right. I knew it was a Texas thing.”

“I was just telling Ostin about our club,” I said.

Taylor suddenly looked nervous. “Did you tell him anything else?”

“No,” I said.

Ostin looked at us curiously. “Tell me what?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Nothing,” Taylor said. She turned to me. “Remember when you asked me where I was born? You’ll never believe what I found out.”

Before she could tell me, two guys walked up to our table wearing letterman jackets. Spencer and Drew. They both played on the basketball team. They were two of the coolest guys at Meridian.

“Hey, Taylor. Whassup?”

She smiled. “Hi guys.”

They sat down at our table.

“This is my friend, Michael,” Taylor said. The taller of the two reached out his hand. “Hey, I’m Spencer.”

The other guy just bobbed his head. “Drew.”

“Hi,” I said. Ostin looked starstruck.

“So are you guys nervous for the game?” Taylor asked.

“Nah,” Spencer said. “It’s just another game.”

“Not hardly,” she said to me. “It’s the regional championship. The winner of this game goes to State.” Drew said, “Cottonwood’s won their last three games. They have this forward who’s on fire.”

Ostin looked at him quizzically. “Literally?”

“What?”

“He’s literally on fire?”

I kicked Ostin under the table.

Drew looked at me. “Where’d you get the shiner?”

“I got in a fight.”

He turned to Taylor. “Hey, this isn’t the kid you told us about who kicked Jack’s butt?”

“That’s him,” Taylor said. “I watched him beat up Jack and two other guys. He’s got a black belt”

“You gotta be kidding me.” Drew looked at me in awe. “Dude, you’re legend.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “Thanks.”

“I’m Ostin,” Ostin said.

Drew said to Ostin, “You gonna eat both those pieces of pizza?”

“Uh, no.” His no sounded like a question.

“Great.” Drew reached over and took one, shoving half of it into his mouth.

Then two more cheerleaders walked up to our table. “Hey, guys. Hi Tay.”

Taylor said, “Hi Dom. Hi Maddie.”

“Hello girls,” Drew said. “Move over, Houston.”

“Ostin,” Ostin said.

The girls sat down between Drew and Ostin. Ostin had a blissful look on his face, like he was in heaven—a nervous heaven—but heaven all the same. I was anxious too. I kept turning away to blink, hoping no one would notice.

“We’re having a party at Maddie’s house after the game,” Dominique said to the table. “Wanna come?”

“Yeah,” Spencer said. “We’ll be there.”

“Can you come, Tay?”

“Yes.” She turned to me. “Michael, you’re coming to the game, aren’t you?”

Her question caught me off guard. “Uh, yeah. Of course,” I said. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

Ostin looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

“Great, you guys want to come to the party after?”

“Sure,” I said.

Taylor turned to the cheerleaders. “Guys, this is my friend, Michael.”

“Hi, Michael,” Dominique said.

“Hi,” Maddie said.

“That’s Houston,” Drew said, pointing at Ostin.

“Nice to meet you,” Ostin said.

“Do you have something in your eye?” Maddie asked me.

I turned red. “Uh, no.”

“You were just blinking kind of funny.”

I wanted to crawl under the table.

“Michael has Tourette’s syndrome,” Taylor said.

“Oh, I thought you were like winking at me,” Drew said.

“No. I can’t help it.”

“Is it, like, contagious?” Drew asked.

“Duh,” Taylor said. “Is stupidity contagious?”

Drew looked genuinely baffled. “I don’t know, is it?”

Spencer laughed. “You’re such an idiot, dude.”

“Sorry,” Drew said to me.

“It’s okay. I was born with it. It makes me blink and stuff.”

Dominique said, “I have a cousin with—how do you say it?”

“Tourette.”

“Yeah, Tourette. His name is Richard, but everyone in his neighborhood calls him King Richard, because he’s, like, totally amazing on any board. Skateboard, snowboard, wakeboard—if it’s a board, he can rule it.”

“That’s nothing,” Drew said. “Mike here is a little Chuck Norris.

The other day he beat up three guys twice his size. You should have seen it. It was awesome.”

“That’s so cool,” Dominique said.

I glanced at Taylor. She grinned.

Ostin just sat and listened, so excited that he didn't seem to notice the loss of his pizza. When the second lunch bell rang he popped up like a toaster pastry. "Gotta go," he said. "Lovely hangin' with you ladies."

No one at the table acted like they'd heard him.

"Hold on," I said, standing. "I need to go too."

"Hey, stay cool, man," Spencer said to me. "See you tonight?"

"Yeah. Good luck with your game."

"Spencer's made All-State," Taylor said. "He already has college scouts checking him out."

"That's really cool," I said.

He shrugged. "I throw a ball through a hoop. Nothing to it. See ya around, man."

Taylor stood up with me. She put her hand on my arm as we walked away from the table. "Sorry we crashed your table. I didn't plan on that happening."

"No, it's cool. I'm just not used to hanging out with those guys."

"What guys? Spencer and Drew?"

"Yeah. And the cheerleaders."

Taylor nodded. "You mean the popular kids."

"Yeah."

"They're no different than anyone else. Besides, they like you."

"Really?"

“Couldn’t you tell?”

“No.” I looked at her. “So why did you lie to them?”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You told them I’m a black belt”

“I told them you have a black belt What’s that around your waist?”

I grinned. “That’s not what they thought you meant.”

“Look, word’s gotten out about what you did to Jack. I mean, you took out three kids twice your size. You think that’s going to go un-noticed? I was just protecting your secret.”

Another bell rang. Taylor sighed. “I’ve got to go. Can’t be late to class. Look, I found out something I need to tell you, but I’ve got to run. We can talk at the party tonight.”

“Okay,” I said. “Wait, I don’t know where your friend lives.”

“You can go with me. Just meet me after the game.”

“Where will you be?”

“Cheering.” She lightly punched my arm. “See ya.”

“Bye.”

Ostin was waiting for me outside the cafeteria doors. “Dude, that was awesome. Bones.” He put out his fist.

I bumped it. “What was awesome?”

“Our table became the cool table.”

“Yeah. That was weird.”

“And they love you. You’re in with the in crowd. I can’t believe Taylor is like all over you.”

“No she’s not.”

“Are you blind? That hottie’s got the hots for you, and she is H-O-T, hot.”

“We’re just friends,” I said.

“Whatever, dude. Whatever. So are we really going to the game?”

“And the party after,” I said.

“Wow,” Ostin said with a broad smile. “What a day.”

After school I walked down to the cafeteria but Ms. Johnson had canceled detention because of the game, so I headed home alone.

As I walked out the doors, Jack, Mitchell, and Wade were standing there. My first thought was that they were waiting for me, but the surprise on their faces convinced me otherwise. My stomach was a cauldron of fear and anger.

Jack threw down the cigarette he was smoking. “What’s up, man?” he said. His tone was different than before—like we were now buddies or something.

I didn’t say anything, but kept on walking.

“How did you do that?” he shouted after me.

I spun around. “Do what?”

“Electrocute us.”

“You want another demonstration?”

Jack raised his hands. “We don’t want any trouble,” he said. “We’re good, right?”

Wade took a slight step back, and Mitchell looked like he’d wet his pants if I said “Boo!”

“No, we’re not good. I’m still on detention because I wouldn’t tell on you guys. You need to talk to Dallstrom and fix that.” I stepped toward them, suddenly feeling the liberation of having nothing to hide.

I don’t know if it was old anger or new confidence, but I said to Jack, “If I have to spend another week in detention . . .” I poked him on his chest and he jumped back, probably anticipating another shock.

“Okay. I’ll tell Dallstrom it’s my fault”

“Good, because if I have another week of detention, I’m coming after you.” I turned to Mitchell. “And you.” Then I turned my whole body toward Wade. “And especially you. And if you think it hurt last time, next time you’re going to think you were struck by lightning. You understand?”

“Hey, no prob, man,” Wade said, his voice quivering.

“We’re cool,” Mitchell said.

“We better be,” I said, turning from them. As I walked away a large smile crossed my face. I just couldn’t help it. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt that good.

Ten minutes later I knocked on Ostin’s door and he answered. “Hey, you’re back early.”

“They canceled detention. So, can you go to the game?”

“Yeah. My mom was so excited she almost fainted. She said, ‘Finally you’re doing something normal.’”

“Just be sure to wear your clogging shoes,” I said.

“They’re tap shoes.”

I hit him on the arm. “Just kidding. I’m going home. I still haven’t asked my mom. I’ll call you in a couple hours.”

When my mother got home from work she hung her sweater in her room, then started boiling water for spaghetti. “So what do you

want to do tonight?”

I had been excited to tell her about the game, but now that she was here I was afraid to ask her. I suppose I felt a little like I was letting her down. “I thought maybe I’d go to the school basketball game,” I said uneasily. “If it’s okay with you.”

She turned to me and smiled. “That sounds fun.” “But then you’ll be alone.”

“I think I can handle that. Do you want me to pick you up when the game’s over?”

“Well, we’ve been invited to a party afterwards. It’s at one of the cheerleaders’ house.”

She looked at me. “So, last night you had no friends, and today you’re getting invited to cheerleader parties. What was in that ice cream?”

“It’s Taylor.”

“She’s the cheerleader?”

“Yeah. She’s kind of becoming a friend.”

I don’t know the last time I saw my mother smile that wide. “Is she nice?”

“She’s really great.” I looked at my mom. We had spent every Friday night together since we moved to Idaho. “You sure you’re okay alone?”

She dropped the pasta into the pot. “Are you kidding?” she said, winking at me. “I’m just glad to finally get you out of my hair. Do you know how many books I have to catch up on? Just call when you’re ready to leave the party, and let me know where to pick you up.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Mom.” I gave her a hug. I love my mother.

Neither Ostin nor I had ever been to a school basketball game before.

We sat near the floor at one end of the gymnasium. Ostin looked as out of place as a Twinkie in a salad bar. I panned the floor for Taylor, but I couldn’t see her.

“These metal bleachers are bruising my butt,” Ostin said. “How long do these things last?”

“You’re too soft,” I said, still looking for Taylor.

“Your girlfriend’s over there,” Ostin said, pointing to a flock of cheerleaders on the other side of the floor.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Yeah, right,” Ostin said.

I waved to Taylor several times, but she didn’t see me. Or at least she didn’t act like she did.

The game was close and at halftime, Meridian was down by five points. The drill team had come out to do their thing when I saw Taylor walk over to our side of the gym.

“Taylor!” I shouted.

She didn’t even look up. Then she walked up to the end of our bench, where Tim Wadsworth was sitting. Tim Wadsworth was the guy every girl at Meridian dreamed of. He had perfect skin, golden hair with a soft curl, straight teeth, and a body that would make a

Greek Olympic statue envious. Mr. Perfection was flirting with Taylor or vice versa. I couldn't tell. As I watched her I got madder and madder. He was holding a Coke and talking to her. Then she took a drink from his cup.

Without even thinking about it I surged.

There were at least twenty people on the bench and they all

jumped up at once, like they were doing the wave. Tim also jumped,

spilling his Coke all over himself. At first Taylor just looked confused, then she looked down the bench and saw me. She glared.

“Why'd you do that?” Ostin asked, rubbing his butt. “That really hurt.”

“Let's get out of here,” I said.

We walked down to the floor and started to leave the auditorium

when Taylor shouted, “Michael!” I turned around. She stormed up to

me, her eyes snapping. She glared at Ostin. “Texas boy, leave.”

“Okay,” Ostin said, quickly walking away.

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She turned back to me. “What was that?”

I was twitching like crazy. “None of your business.”

“It is my business when you act stupid and start drawing attention to yourself.”

“You’re one to talk. You’re always the center of attention.”

“I’m talking about drawing attention to your power.”

“Is it really that you’re worried about or is it Tim Wadsworth?”

“Tim Wadsworth?” Her expression softened. “Oh, I get it. You’re jealous that I was talking to him.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

She smiled. “Hey,” she said sweetly, putting her arms out. “Come here.” I couldn’t believe she had gone so quickly from wanting to hit me to wanting to hug me, but I didn’t really understand girls at all. I just went along with it. “You know, Michael . . .”

Touching her felt really wonderful. “Yes?”

Suddenly she pushed me back. “Ha, you are jealous.”

She had hugged me to read my mind. “You tricked me.”

“Yeah, well you just shocked a whole row of people. The custodian is under the bleachers looking to see if there’s a loose wire or something.”

“Well . . .”

“That’s all you have to say?”

Frankly, I didn’t know what to say. We both stood there stupidly

when suddenly she started to laugh. She was soon laughing so hard she was crying. I just watched her. I was totally confused. “This is so crazy,” she said. “Could you imagine if these people around here could hear what we’re saying?”

“They’d think we’re nuts.”

“You should have seen Tim’s face when you shocked him. He had Coke dripping from his hair.” She looked into my eyes. “I don’t remember the last time I had this much fun. I’m so glad I’ve gotten to know you.”

“Me too,” I said.

She exhaled. “Well, I’ve got to get back to cheering or Mrs. Shaw will have my head. But you and Dallas are still coming to the party with me, right?”

“Ostin,” I corrected.

“Sorry, I keep getting that wrong.”

“Yeah, we’ll come. If you still want us.”

“Of course I do. It will be fun. Besides, I really have to talk to you about what I found out.”

“Great. Where should we meet?”

“Just come down to the floor after the game. See ya.” She took a

few steps and then stopped. “By the way, you’re a lot cuter than Tim Wadsworth.”

She spun around and ran back to the floor. I don’t know. It may have been the greatest moment of my life.

10. A Suspicious Coincidence

The end of the game was pretty exciting. Meridian was ahead by just one point with three seconds left on the clock when they fouled Cottonwood's best player, sending him to the line to shoot free throws. He must have been pretty nervous because he missed both of his shots badly—one of them by at least ten feet.

Everyone went wild. After the game Ostin and I walked down to the floor. Taylor was surrounded by a couple dozen friends but she smiled when she saw me. "Ready to go?"

I nodded.

"Angel's dad is going to give us a ride to Maddie's."

"Me too?" Ostin asked.

"Of course."

The four of us walked out to the parking lot. Angel was a pretty Asian girl, and Ostin just stared at her until it was embarrassing.

Finally she stopped and turned to him. "What?"

"Ostin," he said, putting out his hand to shake.

She looked at his hand, then slowly put out her own. "I'm Angel."

"Are you Chinese or Japanese?"

Her brow furrowed. "Chinese."

"Were you born in China?"

"Yes."

He nodded. “What brought your parents to America? Opportunity? Freedom of speech?”

“My parents are American,” she said. “I was adopted.”

“Oh, you’re adopted.”

I wanted to smack him.

“Sorry, Angel,” I said. “Ostin doesn’t get out much.”

“Hardly ever,” he said.

She shook her head. “It’s okay.”

“And I think you’re the prettiest girl in the world.”

“Enough,” I said to him.

I noticed that Angel smiled.

Maddie’s home was on a long, tree-lined street called Walker Lane, where the rich kids in our school lived. I think her home could have fit our entire apartment building in it and still have had room for an indoor swimming pool, which, by the way, it had. It was the first party I’d been invited to since we moved to Idaho, unless you count Ostin’s last birthday party, which was only me and his obnoxious cousin, Brent, who only came because his aunt made him. Brent broke a beaker in Ostin’s new chemistry set within five minutes of Ostin opening the box. I thought Ostin would have a mental breakdown.

Angel’s dad drove a nice car, a BMW with leather seats the texture and color of footballs. I knew it meant nothing to these kids to ride in a car like that, but I thought it was really cool. So did Ostin.

He was grinning like a Cheshire cat, though it also may have been because he was sitting next to Angel. When Mr. Smith dropped us off I said, “Thank you, sir.”

He smiled. "It's nice to see that not everyone's lost their manners. You're welcome, son."

As we walked up to the house, Taylor took my arm. "Well played."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "You're a real gentleman."

The stairway to the house was lined with little pointy trees growing in ceramic pots. I stopped at the door. I don't always notice my vocal tics, but I was gulping loud enough to get Taylor's attention.

Taylor looked at me. "You okay?" she asked.

I stopped gulping. "Yeah. I guess I'm just a little nervous."

"It's cool. Don't worry about it. We're just here to have fun."

I took a deep breath. "All right."

She opened the door and we were met by a rush of music and light. The house was filled with kids. Maddie, one of the cheerleaders we'd met at lunch, was standing by the door talking to several basketball players. The only one I knew was Spencer.

"Hey, Tay!" Maddie shouted. The girls hugged. They did a lot of that.

Spencer looked over. "Hi, Taylor."

"You were awesome tonight, Spence!" she said.

"Yeah," I said. "You were awesome."

"Thanks, little dude."

Maddie looked at me and cocked her head. "What's your name again? Trent? Trett?" I suddenly realized that she was thinking Tourette.

“No. It’s Michael.”

“Michael. I wonder why I thought it was Trett.”

“And I’m Ostin,” Ostin said.

She didn’t even look at him.

“You have a nice house,” I said.

“Yeah.” She patted my arm. “Well, have fun.” She flitted off.

Ostin was clinging to me like lint to a belly button—at least until he spotted the food table. “Hey, hold the phone, I’ll be right back.”

Taylor turned to me. “Hold what phone?”

“It’s just a saying. He found the food.”

“Good. They’ll be happy together.”

A moment later Ostin returned carrying a plate brimming with potato chips and brownies. “This stuff is great.”

“I see you’ve made yourself at home,” Taylor said.

“My home is nothing like this.”

“Would you like a drink?” I asked Taylor, surprising myself at how formal I sounded.

She reciprocated my tone. “Why yes, kind sir. Thank you.”

“Come on, Ostin,” I said.

On the way to get a soda, Ostin said to me, “I never thought I’d be invited to a party at a place like this.”

“I never thought I’d be invited to a party,” I said.

The food table was in the middle of a luxurious dining room where lit wall insets held porcelain statues spaced evenly between large, original oil paintings mostly of fruit bowls. In the center of the food-laden table was a large tub of ice, packed with bottled water and cans of soda. Drew walked up to me.

“Hey, it’s little Chuck Norris. Give me some,” he said, raising his hand.

“Hey, Drew,” I said. I set down the cup and we high-fived, clasping hands as we did. He fell to one knee pretending I had him in some kind of kung fu grip. “Don’t hurt me, man,” he laughed. “Don’t hurt me.”

I chuckled nervously. “Hey, congrats on the game. You guys played really well.”

“We dodged a bullet, man. Cooper is their best free throw shooter and he tossed two bricks in the last three seconds. We were lucky.”

Living alone with Mom, I had never engaged in small talk about sports, so I wasn’t sure if I was doing it right. “Well, you know what they say about being lucky . . .”

Drew looked stumped. “No. What do they say?”

“It’s better to be lucky than good.”

He looked at me for a moment, then laughed. “You’re all right, little dude.”

“Hi,” Ostin said.

“Hey, what’s up, Houston?”

“Nothing. Just hanging.”

“Houston, we have a problem,” Drew said, then burst out laughing at himself.

Just then a mountain of flesh named Corky walked up behind Drew. Corky was the size of a small planet and had an entourage of girls who moved around him like satellites. I knew who Corky was only because he was always being called up onstage at the school assemblies for winning some award or another. The last thing he'd won was the State Heavyweight Wrestling Championship. He took Drew in a choke hold, then released him. "Drew-meister, what gives?"

"Just hanging around the oasis with my little black-belt friend."

Corky looked me over. My head barely came to his chest. "This isn't the guy you were talking about."

"He's the man," Drew said. "Little Chuck Norris."

"He's a shrimp."

"Only on the outside," Drew said. "On the inside he's a powder keg of pain, just waiting to explode on someone."

Corky laughed. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you? I could crush him like a bug."

"I'd like to see that," said Drew. "Battle of the Titans."

Corky pointed a massive finger at me. "You're talking about the little guy?"

Drew put his arm around me. "This is exactly who I am talking about."

He looked at me incredulously. "C'mon, little guy," he said, gesturing for me to follow him. "Let's go outside and spar a little. I want to see what you got."

Drew laughed. "He'll mess you up, dude. I'm not kidding."

"I've got to see this," one of the girls said.

"I've got to get Taylor a drink . . .," I said.

“She won’t die of thirst,” Corky said. “C’mon, I won’t hurt you. We’re just playing around.”

Just then Taylor walked up. “Hi guys. Hi Cork.” She looked around. “What’s going on?”

“Corky wants to engage the little dude in hand-to-hand,” Drew said. “Called him out.”

Taylor looked at me, then back at Drew. “What?”

Ostin translated. “He heard about Michael’s fight with Jack and he wants to see what Michael can do.”

“Black belt or not, I’m going to crush him,” Corky said.

Taylor glanced over at me with a look that said: *How do you get yourself into these things?* Then, to my surprise, she said, “Awesome. Let’s do it.” She looked around then shouted. “Everyone outside! Michael’s going to take down Corky!”

I couldn’t believe what she was saying. As we walked out amid the river of bodies I whispered, “Are you trying to get me killed?”

“Trust me.”

“That you will get me killed?”

“No, I’m trying to get you out of this mess.”

The house emptied as everyone poured out of the house into the backyard. Corky started cracking his knuckles. Ostin grabbed my shoulder. “Dude, you know you can’t use your power.”

“I know.”

“He’s going to kill you.”

“I know.”

Taylor walked to the front of the crowd as if she were the master of ceremonies. “Okay, so here’s the deal. First one knocked to the ground loses. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough,” Corky said, bobbing a little.

“Taylor . . . ,” I said.

She reached into her pocket. “And here’s a twenty-dollar bill that says Michael’s going to put Corky on his back. Any takers?”

Everyone looked at each other, but to my surprise, no one was willing to bet against her. I mean, the guy could wad me up like a piece of paper and shoot me out a straw. Taylor looked at Corky. “C’mon, Corky. You’re going to crush him, right? Where’s your money?”

He looked at her hesitantly. “I don’t have my wallet . . .”

“In fact, let’s make it sweeter. The loser has to wear my skirt to school on Monday.”

I looked at her. Now I was sure she was trying to get back at me for shocking Tim at the game.

“All day. And, he has to carry the other’s books and tie his shoes.”

To my surprise Corky was suddenly looking very nervous.

“Come on, Corky,” Taylor said. “He’s half your size. On the other hand, there’s only one of you. The last time I saw him, he had three guys on their backs begging for mercy. It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen.” Taylor turned back to face the crowd, who had formed a half circle around them. “Who wants to see Corky wearing my skirt on Monday?”

A large cheer went up. I noticed that Corky was sweating. “Hey, I was just kidding around. I don’t want to hurt the little guy. Cool?”

I breathed out a sigh of relief. “Cool.”

Just then Drew stepped in. “Arrgh,” Drew said in his best pirate, “them be fightin’ wards, matie. Wards yu’ll be a regrettin’. Lil Norris be so tough he can kick the back side ’a yar face.”

Everyone laughed, which started a barrage of Chuck Norris jokes.

“Little Norris is so tough, when he does push-ups he doesn’t push himself up. He pushes the earth down.”

“Little Norris is so tough, he can lead a horse to water and make it drink.”

“What’s the matter, Corky?” someone shouted. “Chicken?” Then someone started a chant, “Vey, Vey, Vey.”

Now Corky couldn’t back out—he’d never live it down. There was no way around it; we were going to spar. It was a classic David and Goliath scenario, except I couldn’t use my slingshot. I was going to get killed.

Taylor sidled up to me. “That didn’t go the way I thought it would.”

“Really?” I said.

“It’s not so bad.”

“How is this ‘not so bad’?”

“Well, no one expects you to beat him. So if you lose, you’ll look brave for fighting a monster. And if you somehow win, you’ll be a legend.”

“I feel much better now,” I said sarcastically.

She looked at Corky, then back to me. “Wait. I’ve got another idea.”

“I can’t wait to hear it.”

“When I say ‘go,’ run into him as hard as you can and try to knock him down.”

“Are you kidding me? He’s a freakin’ brick wall.”

“Trust me.”

“I did.”

“Trust me again.”

“Let’s go!” Corky shouted impatiently. “Let’s get this going.”

“All right,” Taylor said, stepping away from me. “When I say ‘go,’ come out fighting. Ready . . .”

Corky’s eyes narrowed into small slits as he leaned forward on the balls of his feet, squaring off the way he did before a wrestling match.

After the razzing Taylor gave him, I don’t think he was going to hold back.

“Get set . . .”

His fists balled up. I swallowed and tried not to look overly terrified—just a little terrified. I was certain he could smell my fear.

Don’t panic, I told myself.

“Go!”

I took off running at him, feeling like a pitched baseball about to be smacked out of the park. Shouting like a madman, I slammed into him with everything I had, my face buried into his very solid abs.

To my amazement he stumbled backward and fell, crashing to the ground in an azalea bush.

“Yeah!” shouted Drew, running to Corky. “I told you, man! Little Norris rules.”

As I lifted myself up, Corky was still on his back, covered in white flower petals and looking dazed. Drew pointed his finger in Corky’s face. “I warned you, don’t mess with the little Norris. The kid’s got sweet moves.”

The truth is, I was more surprised than anyone, including Corky.

I put my hand out to lift him up, which he fortunately ignored, since I’d need a car jack to lift him. He slowly climbed to his feet, wiping off his backside. “Good job, kid.”

Taylor walked up to him. “I’m not letting you wear my skirt,” she said. “You’ll stretch it. But it looks like you’ll be carrying Michael’s books.”

I waved it off. “No,” I said, “we were just messing around. He could have crushed me like a bug. Thanks for taking it easy on me.”

Corky, still confused about what had happened, looked at me and nodded. “Hey, no problem. I don’t know where you learned that junk, but you’re pretty good.”

Drew put his arm around me. “He’s the man. You gotta start hanging out with us, little Norris.”

The crowd gathered around me. A pretty girl with long black curly hair walked up to me. I knew her from math class but she had never acknowledged my existence. “Hi, Michael. I’m Chantel. That was so cool,” she said, her brown eyes locked on mine.

“Thanks.”

“What school do you go to?”

“Meridian. I’m in your math class.”

“Really? I’ve never seen you.”

“I sit right behind you.”

“Oh,” she said, blushing a little. “Lucky me.”

Taylor grabbed my arm. “Come on, Michael.”

“We’ll catch up later,” I said to her.

She smiled and waved. “See you in math.”

Everyone was giving me high-fives and patting me on the back as Taylor dragged me off.

“Why do I have to go?” I asked.

“So you don’t get a big head,” Taylor said.

“Where are we going?”

“Where no one will hear us. Come on, Ostin.”

“You got my name right,” he said.

We went back inside. Ostin grabbed another brownie from the table and the three of us went upstairs to a bedroom. Inside, Taylor locked the door behind us.

“Where’d you learn that move?” Ostin asked. “That was awesome. You took down gorilla-man without your powers.”

“It wasn’t me,” I said. I looked at Taylor. “Was it?”

She sat down on the bed. “It was sort of you. You did knock him down.”

Ostin’s eyes darted back and forth between us. “What did she do?”

“The same thing she did to Poulsen. She rebooted him. Didn’t you?”

“What?” Ostin said.

I looked at Taylor. “Can I tell him?”

She rolled her eyes. “You just did.”

“Well, you showed him first.”

“What are you talking about?” Ostin said, looking back and forth between us.

“Taylor has powers like mine,” I said.

Ostin’s jaw dropped. “She can shock like you?”

“Not exactly. She can shock people’s brains.”

“What?”

“She can reboot people.”

I didn’t have to explain “reboot” to Ostin—he was all about computers. “Ah,” he said, a large smile crossing his face. “Like pressing the reset button. I get it. That’s why Poulsen looked like he’d been sucker-punched. I just thought he had a brain tumor or something. So how does that work?”

“I don’t know,” Taylor said. “I just look at them and concentrate.”

“So how did you knock that guy over?”

“I didn’t, Michael did. I just rebooted him a second before Michael crashed into him. He didn’t even know where he was.”

“That’s awesome!” Ostin said.

“No, it’s not,” I said. “She shouldn’t be using her powers in public like that. Someone will figure it out.”

“I know.” She looked down, covering her eyes with her hands.

“I need to confess something.” She looked up at me. “But first, you need to promise me that you won’t get mad, okay? I feel bad enough about it.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Promise me.”

“All right. I promise.”

“I won the basketball game for us. At least I might have.”

“What do you mean?”

“I rebooted that guy as he was shooting his free throws. That’s why he missed so badly.”

“That’s just wrong,” Ostin said.

I looked at her in disbelief. “After what you said to me at the game? What happened to not using our powers in public?”

“I know. I just didn’t want to lose. I’m such a hypocrite. I, like, ruined that guy’s life.”

Ostin started pacing. “People, we need to keep this under control. That’s why we need the club, to set standards.” His mouth spread in a broad smile. “And I have a name for our club. The Electroclan.”

“What’s an Electroclan?” I asked.

“It’s just a name,” Ostin said. “The electro part is self-evident. A clan is a group of people who all have the same . . .”

“I like it,” Taylor said before he finished. “It’s catchy.”

“I told you he was good at this,” I said. I could tell by his crooked smile that Ostin was feeling pretty good about himself. First Taylor had remembered his name, now she liked the name he’d come up with for the club. “Now we need bylaws and a mission statement.”

“What kind of bylaws?” Taylor asked.

“Like, for instance, who we can tell about our powers,” Ostin said.

“Which would be *no one*,” I said.

“And when we can use our powers,” Ostin said.

“That’s easy for you,” Taylor said. “You don’t have powers.”

“Yes I do. Advanced intellectual powers.”

“They’re not electric.”

“You’re wrong. Technically, all thinking is electric. The brain consists of about a hundred billion cells, most of which are neurons whose primary job is shooting electrical impulses down an axon, and—”

“All right,” I said, “we get it.”

“So, I’m just as powerful as . . .” He suddenly looked down, then over at me. “What was I saying?”

I looked at Taylor and she grinned.

Ostin turned red. “You rebooted me, didn’t you?”

“Well, you’re just so powerful.”

“You can’t do that,” he said. “You don’t know if that damages someone’s brain. It could burn brain cells.”

“Relax, Ostin,” I said. “You’ve got plenty to burn.” I turned to Taylor. “He’s right, you know. We shouldn’t be using our powers on each other.”

“I was just fooling around.”

“All right,” I said. “Rule number one: No using powers against each other.”

“And we need a mission statement,” Ostin said, though this time not quite as confidently.

“We need a mission,” I said.

“I think I have one,” Taylor said, moving closer to me. “To find out why you and I have powers. I’ve discovered something that might be important.”

I sat down on the bed next to her. “What?”

“Okay, you were born in California, right?”

“Pasadena.”

“Get this . . . so was I.”

“Really?”

“I asked my parents. I was born at Pasadena General Hospital. So I went online and tried to find our birth records. They have the records of births for the last forty-two years. In all that time just eleven days are missing. Guess which days.”

“Our birthdays?” I ventured.

“Exactly,” Taylor said.

“That’s weird,” I said.

“Statistically, an improbability,” Ostin said. “You two born at the same hospital nearly the same day with the similar mutant variation.”

“Mutant variation?” I said.

“For lack of a better term.”

“Find a better term,” Taylor said. “I like power.”

“Clearly,” Ostin said, loud enough for us to hear.

“I mean the word *power*. We have similar powers.” She looked at me. “I’m not a mutant.”

“Technically,” Ostin said, “you are.”

“Yeah, well you’re a geek.”

“And you’re a mutant.”

“If you say that again I’m going to reboot you.”

I stood up. “Stop it, you two. Ostin, quit calling us mutants or I’ll shock you.”

He blanched.

“Why would the records be hidden?” I asked.

“Same reason I hide my diary from my mother,” Taylor said.

“Because you’d get in trouble if she found it,” I said. I smiled at Taylor. “I think you’re on to something.”

“Except we’ve hit a dead end,” she said. “The records are gone.”

“There’s more than one way to skin the proverbial cat,” Ostin said, still feeling a little abused. “The county recorder’s office will have vital statistics for . . .”

“Can you even speak English?” Taylor said.

“Excuse me. The government has records of all the deaths and births during that time period even if the hospital doesn’t.”

“Excellent,” I said. “So we just look up those births and see where they lead.”

“I’ll do it,” Ostin said. “I’ll look them up and analyze them for our next club meeting. When should we meet again?”

“You have your birthday party tomorrow,” Taylor said, “and I have mine on Sunday. Monday I have cheerleading practice. How about Tuesday?”

“Works for me,” Ostin said. The only thing Ostin ever had on his calendar was clogging and the Discovery Channel.

“Good with me,” I said. “Then the first meeting of the Electroclan is hereby adjourned until next Tuesday.”

“Good,” Ostin said. “I hope there’s some of those brownies left.”

The three of us walked back downstairs. I glanced at my watch. It was around ten-thirty. I said to Taylor, “I need to call my mom for a ride home.”

“Don’t you have a phone?” she asked.

I felt embarrassed. “No. Things are kind of tight right now.”

“You can use my cell phone,” she said. She flipped it open and handed it to me. I pushed the buttons, but the screen kept dissolving into static. “What’s wrong with your phone?”

She looked at it. “I don’t know, nothing was wrong with it earlier.

Let me try it.” I handed it back. She pushed a few buttons. “It’s fine.

Maybe it’s you.”

“Maybe you better dial.”

“What’s your number?”

“Two-zero-eight, five-five-five, three-nine-eight-nine.”

She dialed the number. After a moment she said, “Hello, Mrs. Vey, this is Taylor Ridley. I’m calling for Michael.” I put my hand out for the phone but she didn’t surrender it. “Thanks, we’re having a good time.” Long pause. “That sounds really fun. When are you doing it? Okay. I think that will be fine. I look forward to meeting you too. Here’s Michael.” She handed me the phone with her hand over the mouthpiece. “Your mom invited me over tomorrow night for cake and ice cream.”

“You’re coming?”

“If it’s okay with you.”

“Sure.” I put the phone to my ear. “Hi, Mom. Yeah, that’s okay. Sorry, I just have a bad connection. Well, it’s just me, okay. We’re over on Walker Lane. Walker Lane. The address is Thirty-Four Fifty-Five South Walker Lane. You can’t miss it, the house is huge. Okay. Bye.”

I handed Taylor her phone. “That’s so weird,” I said. “I’ve never had that problem before.”

“Maybe your electricity is increasing,” Taylor said.

“Tomorrow, we’ll check your voltage again,” Ostin said.

I felt like an old car battery when he said that.

Ostin said to Taylor, “Hey, if you’re coming over to Michael’s, we can have another meeting.”

I looked at Taylor.

“Fine with me,” she said.

“Fine with me,” I said.

Ostin smiled. “Great. Bones.” He put out his fist.

I put out my fist.

“I don’t do that,” Taylor said.

I admired how easily she’d gotten out of that. I’d have to remember to do that next time.

11. Birthday Wishes

Saturday morning my mother got up early and made my second favorite breakfast: hot chocolate and crepes, both of them topped with whipped cream and chocolate syrup. My birthday was the one time of year that my mother said nothing when I filled my plate with more whipped cream than crepe.

She made herself a simple crepe with butter and powder sugar then sat down next to me. “I’m sorry I have to work today. Are you sure you’re okay with celebrating after school on Monday?”

“I don’t care what day we celebrate,” I said with my mouth full.

“And we’ll have cake and ice cream tonight. Do you and Ostin still want to go to the new aquarium on Monday?”

“Yeah. And can we go to PizzaMax for dinner?”

“Whatever you want. It’s your day.” She smiled at me and her eyes got all sparkly. “I can’t believe you’re fifteen. Another year and you’ll be driving. You’ve grown into such a fine young man. I am so proud of you.”

My mom always got emotional on my birthdays. Watermark moments, she called them. Whatever that means.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Wait, I have a present.” She ran out of the room and came back a moment later carrying a small rectangular box wrapped in tissue paper. “I know we usually wait until we have cake to open presents, but I wanted to give this to you now. It’s special.”

I pulled off the wrapping to expose a dark blue velvet box. I opened it. Inside was a man’s watch.

“Wow.”

“It was your father’s,” she said.

I lifted it out of the box, admiring it.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“A lot. It’s cool.”

“Well, you’re a man now, so I wanted to give you something special. Turn it over; there’s something written on the back.”

I turned the watch around. It said, “I love you forever—Mom.”

“I had it engraved.”

I hugged her. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome.”

I couldn’t imagine a better gift. I wanted to tell her that she was the best mother in the world. I didn’t. I should have.

12. The First Meeting

About an hour after my mother left for work, Ostin knocked on my door. He was carrying the multimeter and his notebook. He noticed the can of whip cream on the counter. “Dude, did you have crepes?”

“Yes.”

“Any left?”

“In the fridge. You can microwave them.”

He heated up the remaining crepes, then piled them high with powder sugar and whipped cream while I played a video game.

“That was a cool party last night.”

I nodded, intent on my game. “Yeah, it was.”

“Especially when you knocked Corky over.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Taylor’s really a babe. You know she likes you.”

“She likes everyone.”

“I don’t mean it like that. I mean she *likes* you. I read this book on body language. And I was watching her body.”

“Yeah, I bet you were.”

“No, for scientific purposes.”

“I bet,” I said.

When he'd finished eating the last of the crepes he came over to the table. "Okay, let's see if there's been a change in your electrical status."

I paused the game. After the cell phone incident I was curious to find out myself. "Let's do it."

"Wait, what's that?" he said, pointing to my new watch.

I held up my arm. "It's a watch my mom gave me this morning for my birthday."

"What's it made of?"

"I think silver. It has my name engraved on it."

"Hmm," he said. "Silver has high conductivity, even more than copper. That's why they use it in satellites and computer keyboards."

Ostin always vomited up everything he knew about a subject.

"So?"

"Well, you should probably take it off. It might throw off our readings."

"All right." I unclasped it and laid it across the kitchen counter.

Then I clipped the multimeter's cables to the ends of my fingers.

Ostin looked down at the machine. "Ready? Three, two, one, go!"

I surged.

Electricity sparked from the copper ends. "Whoa!" Ostin cried.

He set down the machine and began scribbling in his notebook.

I unhooked the clips. "What was I?"

“Dude, you’re not going to believe it.”

“What?”

“This thing goes to a thousand volts and it’s saying ERROR. You’re definitely becoming more electric.”

I sat down on one of the kitchen bar stools and put my watch back on. I wondered what that meant: more electric. “Do you think it will stop?”

“I don’t know. No wonder Taylor’s cell phone didn’t work.” He set down his notebook. “So is Taylor really coming over for cake and ice cream?”

“She said she was. Then afterwards we can have our first official meeting of the Electroclan.”

“That’s sick,” Ostin said. “Real sick.”

Ostin and I played video games most of the day except when we took a break and walked to the 7-Eleven for Slurpees.

Around five o’clock Ostin’s dad came and got him for dinner.

After he left I made myself macaroni and cheese again, then lay on the couch and read from one of the books I’d been assigned in my English class — *Lord of the Flies*. I read until Ostin came back an hour later. We still had time for a few games of Halo before my mother got home.

Mom got home at the usual time, a little after six-thirty. I could tell from her eyes that it had been a hard day. Still, she smiled when she saw me. She was carrying a chocolate butter cream cake from the supermarket’s bakery. “I got your favorite cake,” she said as she walked in. “Hi Ostin.”

“Hi Mrs. Vey. How was work?”

“It was work,” she replied. She set the cake down on the counter.

She looked at the multimeter but didn’t say anything about it.

“Did you boys get some dinner?” She spotted the dishes in the sink and the pan still on stove. “Oh, you did. Mac and cheese.”

“Sorry, I didn’t do the dishes,” I said. “I got distracted with the game.”

“That’s okay, it’s your birthday.”

While my mother was changing her clothes the doorbell rang.

“Michael, would you get that?” she shouted from her room.

“Got it, Mom.”

I paused the game, then opened the door. Taylor stood in the hallway holding a wrapped package. I immediately started blinking.

“Happy birthday,” Taylor said. She held out the present. “This is for you.”

“Wow. Thank you.” I felt dumb that I hadn’t got her anything.

“Come in.”

“Thanks.”

Ostin stared in awe, as if we’d just received an angelic visitation, which wasn’t far from the truth.

“Hi, Tex,” she said.

I knew she was kidding but I don’t think Ostin did. He was a genius about everything but girls.

“Hey, Taylor,” he said. He’d pretty much given up on correcting everyone. As he was fond of saying, “I don’t care what you call me as long as it’s not late to dinner.” I think he meant it.

My mother walked out from her room. She smiled when she saw Taylor. “You must be Taylor,” she said.

“Hello,” Taylor said. She walked up and shook my mother’s hand. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.” My mom glanced over at me standing there, holding the wrapped package.

“Taylor brought me a present,” I said.

“How thoughtful. Michael, will you get the ice cream from the freezer?”

“Sure.”

My mom led Taylor over to the table. I hoped she wouldn’t interrogate her, but, of course, she did.

“So Ridley’s an interesting name. Is it Scottish?”

“No, it means ‘cleared woods’ in Old English. So I’m like a vacant lot.”

My mother laughed. “Have you lived around here for a while?”

“I’ve lived in the same house my whole life.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“I have two older brothers. They both go to college. So it’s kind of like being an only child.”

“Well, we’re happy you could come tonight. Just go ahead and sit down, and I’ll get the cake.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Vey.”

My mother walked back in the kitchen, where I was scooping ice cream into bowls. “What a cute girl,” she whispered to me. “Well done.”

“C’mon, Mom. She’s just a friend.”

My mom just smiled. She put sixteen candles on the cake—one extra for good luck—lit them, and carried the cake to the table.

The three of them sang “Happy Birthday” to me, and we sat around the table for the next hour and talked and laughed. Taylor and my mother really seemed to hit it off.

I was surprised at how talkative Taylor was. She even told us her favorite birthday story. “When I was five, my mom made this *Beauty and the Beast* cake with all these plastic trees and they caught on fire so we had a big forest fire on our kitchen table until my dad blew it out with the fire extinguisher. He’s a little extreme that way. It put out the fire but ruined the cake, so my mom ended up putting candles on Twinkies.”

We all laughed except for Ostin, who, no doubt, would have done the exact same thing as Taylor’s dad.

“When is your birthday, Taylor?” my mom asked.

“Sunday.”

She turned to me. “Michael, why didn’t you tell me? This should have been a joint party.”

“It’s just cake,” I said.

Taylor said, “So Michael, are you going to open my gift?”

“Yes.” I peeled the paper back, then opened the box. Inside was a black hoodie with our school’s name printed on the front.

“Do you like it?” Taylor asked. “I thought you could, like, wear it to the games.”

I held it up. “It’s awesome. Thanks.”

“Cool,” Ostin said. “My birthday is in March.”

My mother smiled. "That's a very sweet gift."

Taylor grinned happily. "It's nothing."

We sat around and talked until nine, when my mother started gathering up the dishes. "I think I'm going to call it a night. Taylor, do you have a ride home?"

"My dad's going to pick me up."

"Well it was very nice meeting you. I hope we'll be seeing you again."

She smiled. "Thank you, Mrs. Vey. I'm glad you invited me."

"You're very welcome. Good night, Ostin."

"Good night, Mrs. Vey. Thanks for the cake."

My mom walked over to me and kissed my forehead. "I love you. Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Mom. I love you too."

She walked off to her bedroom.

When she was gone Taylor said, "You're mom is really nice."

"She's a babe," Ostin said.

"Dude, she's my mother. You've got to stop saying that."

"Sorry."

Taylor laughed. "Well, she is. I hope I'm that hot when I'm a mom."

I wished my mother had heard what Taylor said. Lately she had been saying that she thought she looked old.

Ostin said, “So, let’s get our meeting started. Who’s going to call it to order?”

I looked at Taylor.

“I think you should be the president,” she said to me.

“Why me?”

“Because I said so.”

“I second that,” Ostin said.

Somehow her reasoning seemed a little ironic, but I wasn’t about to fight her on it. “Okay, I call the first meeting of the Electroclan to order.” I looked at Taylor. “Now what?”

“We need to follow up on our last meeting.”

“We need minutes,” Ostin said.

“No more than thirty,” Taylor said. “My dad’s coming to pick me up.”

“No, minutes is what they call the notes from the last meeting,” I said.

Ostin rolled his eyes.

“Sorry,” she said.

Ostin started. “In our last meeting Taylor shared her discovery that you were both born in the same hospital in Pasadena, California, a very unlikely coincidence. Then Ostin pointed out that the fact that both of you having this mutan—”

Taylor looked at him and he stopped.

“. . . power is a statistical improbability. And third, the hospital records of said hospital, for the eleven days around your birth dates beginning April

sixteenth, appear to have been conveniently ex-punged.”

Taylor looked at me. “Does he always talk like this?”

“Pretty much,” I said. “*Expunged* means erased.” I only knew because Ostin loved using that word. “Thanks, Ostin.”

“I have something very important to add to the record,” Ostin said.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“I discovered something very disturbing. During those eleven days there were two hundred and eighty-seven births in Pasadena County.”

“What’s so disturbing about that?” Taylor said.

Ostin looked at her. “May I continue?”

“Sorry.”

“Fifty-nine of those babies were born at Pasadena General Hospital, where you two were born. As I looked over the records, I came across something very, very peculiar.” He paused just to make sure he had our attention. “Forty-two of the children born during that time didn’t live more than two days.”

“What?” Taylor and I said almost in unison.

“I checked the same time period the month before and there was *only one* baby that didn’t live.”

“Forty times the number of . . . ?” I couldn’t say it.

“That is so sad,” Taylor said. “Did it say what happened to them?”

“Unknown causes.” Ostin scratched his head. “But it gets stranger.

Get this: ninety-eight percent of those who didn't live were born at Pasadena General. In fact, only seventeen of them lived, and that includes you two."

I leaned forward on my chair. "You're saying that out of fifty-eight births only seventeen babies survived?"

"Precisely." Ostin knit his fingers together. "It couldn't be a coincidence. A forty-two hundred percent increase in death in an eleven-day period and the records of those eleven days disappear. It's no coincidence. I'm guessing that whatever caused those deaths has something to do with whoever destroyed the records."

"We need to find out what was different about those eleven days," Taylor said.

"My thinking exactly," Ostin said. "Just give me a few days to get to the bottom of it."

Ostin told Taylor about my most recent voltage test and a few minutes later we adjourned our meeting. A little after nine-thirty, Taylor's dad called from our parking lot and I walked her out. Her father was driving his police cruiser, which seemed to me kind of strange, as I always just thought that police cars were for picking up bad guys, not your kid. I guess I had never known anyone who had a police officer for a parent.

Taylor's dad looked pretty tough. His window was down and his arm was hanging out of it. He smacked the side of the car as we approached.

"Dad, this is Michael."

"The birthday boy," he said. "Why aren't you in your birthday suit?"

Taylor rolled her eyes. "Dad, why do you try to embarrass every boy I'm with?"

He leaned back into the car. "It's my job."

“Sorry about that,” Taylor said. “He loves to harass boys. When I’m old enough to date he’s going to be a nightmare.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Thanks for coming over. And for the gift. It was really cool.”

“Thank you for inviting me.” She smiled. “Actually, I guess I should thank your mom.”

“She’s braver than I am,” I said. “Hey, we’re going to have my real birthday party Monday after school. We’re going downtown to the aquarium and then out for pizza. Want to come?” Somehow the invitation sounded dumb as it left my mouth.

“I’d love to.”

“Really?” I guess I was still getting used to the idea that she liked being with me. “We’re leaving around four-thirty.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry, that won’t work. I have cheerleading until five.”

“We can wait,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“We could even pick you up at school.”

“That sounds good. You sure it’s okay with your mom?”

“She’ll be thrilled. I can tell she likes you.”

Taylor smiled. “Okay. I’ll see you at school.” She climbed into the patrol car. “Thanks again.”

“Have a happy birthday tomorrow.”

“Thank you. Good night.”

“Good night, Mr. Ridley,” I said.

“Night, Michael.”

Her father drove off. The police car’s siren chirped, then its lights flashed for just a second. Taylor waved to me from the back window.

Hands down it was my best birthday ever.

13. Spiders

I've never cared much for Mondays. If I were the king of the world, I'd have Mondays removed from the calendar. Of course the problem in that is that Tuesdays would become the new Monday, which would defeat the purpose.

Then again, if I were king of the world I probably wouldn't hate Mondays. Notwithstanding, this was one Monday I was looking forward to. I was celebrating my birthday with my mom, Ostin, and Taylor at PizzaMax. What could be better than that?

As I suspected, my mother was thrilled to hear I had invited Taylor, though I'm not sure if she was more excited that Taylor was coming, or that I had actually gotten up the courage to ask her. We were eating breakfast when I said, "So we need to pick Taylor up at the school, okay?"

My mother smiled. "No problem."

"I was thinking I should get her a present. Do you know what girls like?"

She smiled at me wryly. "I should hope so, I'm a girl."

"I know. I mean one my age."

"Trust me, we're all the same. We like clothes and jewelry. And flowers."

"I only have twenty-six dollars," I said.

"Does she have an iPod?"

"I think so."

"You could get her an iPod gift card. We have them at the store."

"That's a cool present."

“That way every time she listens to a song she bought with it she’ll think of you.”

“Mom.”

She laughed. “I’m just trying to help.”

Ostin had another dentist appointment that morning, so after breakfast my mom dropped me off at school. I can’t believe the difference a weekend can make. Somehow I went from zero to hero. People I didn’t even know said hi to me in the hall, and the basketball team, who previously didn’t know I existed, had taken to calling me “Little Norris.” I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like it.

That afternoon I was standing in line for hot lunch when Ostin marched up to me. “Dude, we need to talk.”

“Hold on, I’m getting my lunch.”

“This is more important than food. This is vital.”

Those were words I never thought I’d hear from Ostin’s mouth.

“You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack, dude. And we need Taylor.”

I looked around. “I don’t know where she is.”

“She’s over there,” he said, pointing across the crowded lunchroom. That’s when I first realized Ostin had Tay-dar. I don’t know why he was so much better at finding her than I was, but he definitely was. Taylor was sitting at a table with five other girls. “You need to get her. Now!”

“You go get her,” I said.

“She won’t come with me. She doesn’t even remember my name.”

“Yes she does. She’s just teasing you.”

“You’re the president of the Electroclan,” he said. “It’s your responsibility.”

I wondered what good it was being president of something if you’re always being told what to do by the members. I relented. “All right.”

“I’ll meet you in the courtyard.”

I left the lunch line and walked up to her table. Taylor was in the middle of telling a story, and one of the girls nudged her when she saw me approach. Taylor looked up at me. “Hi, Michael.”

I felt awkward with all the girls looking at me. I did my best not to twitch. “Uh, can I talk to you?” I fumbled for an excuse. “About biology.”

She looked at me quizzically. “Sure. What’s up?”

“Can I talk to you in private?”

“Wooo,” one of the girls said.

“Shut up, Katie,” Taylor said, standing. “I’ll be right back.” We stepped away from the table.

“What’s going on?”

“Ostin says he needs to talk to us. He says it’s vital.”

“Vital?”

“He skipped lunch to talk to us.”

“That is vital. Where is he?”

“He’s in the courtyard.”

We walked together to the school's outer courtyard. Ostin was sitting alone on a bench, a little hunched over as if hiding. He stood when he saw us. He was clutching a piece of paper.

"Hi Ostin," Taylor said. "What's up?" Had he not been so grim I think he would have been overjoyed that she got his name right.

"Everyone sit down," he said gravely.

We sat on both sides of him.

"Remember our last meeting? We were wondering about what might have happened around those days you were born."

"The eleven days," I said. "When all the babies died."

"Exactly. What I did was look through the newspaper for anything out of the ordinary that began the day or week before April sixteenth. Everything looked pretty usual until I found this." He held up a sheet of paper. "It's a newspaper article from the Los Angeles Times."

He read it out loud.

Pasaaana—Scientists from Elgen Inc., an international medical equipment provider, announced today the discovery of a new method of body imaging, which they claimed will "render current MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imagery) technology obsolete. The new machine, called the MEI (Magnetic Electron Induction), was created at a cost of more than \$2 billion and, according to its developers, "has the potential to deliver benefits of diagnosis and treatment once considered an impossibility." Dr. C. James Hatch, Elgen Inc.'s CEO, said, "This new technology will have the same effect on current medical technology that the X-ray machine had at the turn of the 19th century." Current MRI technology uses radio waves to generate images of organs and tissues. In closely guarded technology, the MEI creates electrically charged molecules that are 1,200 to 1,500 times more visible than current MRI readings. This method is the first of its kind to employ electrons to create an enhanced view of the body. "This new

technology will benefit every known discipline of medicine and possibly many that have not yet been pioneered,” said Dr. John Smart, one of the machine’s inventors and professor emeritus at Harvard Medical School. “This technology may very well pave the way to new disciplines in health studies.” The MEI technology has received FDA approval for limited human testing and is currently being installed in Pasadena General Hospital. Human testing is planned to begin April 16 of this year.

Ostin set down his paper. “Now here’s the clincher. Twelve days later a small article ran in the *Times* saying that the MEI experiment had been temporarily suspended due to some minor technical malfunction.”

“Hmm,” I said. “What are the odds that all those babies started dying the day the machine was turned on and ended the exact same day they turned it off?”

“Impossible odds,” Ostin said. “Crazy impossible. The machine must have something to do with it.”

“You mean they put all those babies through the machine?”

“No, they wouldn’t do that. I’m guessing that something went wrong and the machine’s waves traveled through the walls.”

“And if the machine was somehow responsible for those deaths,”

Taylor said, “the people who owned the machine wouldn’t want others to find out about what happened to all those babies or they could be sued for millions.”

“Tens of millions,” I said.

“Hundreds of millions,” Ostin said.

“Wow,” Taylor said. “Think about it, they’ve been hiding this from the public for fifteen years. If they knew that we knew . . .”

“That,” Ostin said, looking even more worried, “is why I needed to talk to you.” He turned to Taylor. “How did you look up those first hospital records?”

“On the Internet.”

“Where?”

“On my computer,” Taylor said.

“At home?”

“Yes. Why?”

He combed his fingers back through his hair. “I was afraid of that.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I asked.

“Hopefully, nothing. But they might have set up spiders.”

Taylor asked, “What’s that?”

“Spiders comb the Web looking for references to certain topics or inquiries. They could have programmed their computer to alert them whenever someone looks up a certain topic.”

“Such as birth records at Pasadena General during those eleven days,” I said.

Ostin nodded. “Exactly,” he said breathlessly. “You need to clear off anything on your computer connected to that search, cookies and everything. If they track you down . . .”

“What would they do?”

“They’ve already killed forty people. With more than two billion dollars of research at stake, who knows?”

Taylor suddenly blanched. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“Something happened Saturday while I was at your party. What was the name of that company again?”

“Elgen Inc.”

Taylor suddenly looked pale. “Meet me at my locker.” She sprinted off toward the building. She had already opened her locker by the

time we caught up to her. She pulled out a glossy, trifold brochure and handed it to me. The piece looked like a recruitment brochure for some kind of school. The cover of the brochure had a picture of well-dressed, smiling students walking in front of a beautiful building. Taylor said in a hushed voice, “This guy came over Saturday night and met with my parents. He said he was from a very special school in Pasadena, California. He told my parents that nationally this school only selects seventeen students a year and that I had been recommended by an anonymous source for entry. They said it was the most prestigious boarding school in the country and those who attended were guaranteed a full-ride scholarship to the university of their choice: Harvard, Yale, anywhere.

“My parents were way excited, but told him that they could never afford the tuition. The man said not to worry about it, that they were offering me a full scholarship, including books, room, and board. All I had to do was show up.”

Ostin looked jealous. “But you’re only in ninth grade.”

“That’s what my parents said, but the man claimed that starting their students young is one of the reasons their students are so successful and that any student enrolled in their school could pretty much name their college and salary. My parents told him they needed to think about it, because they didn’t want me to be away.”

“What’s the name of the school?” I asked.

“The Elgen Academy of Pasadena.”

“Elgen?” I looked again at the brochure.

Taylor looked afraid. “What have I gotten myself into?”

“You’ve got to erase everything off your computer as soon as you can,” Ostin said.

I shook my head. “If it’s them it’s already too late for that. You better tell your mom and dad.”

“Tell them what? That their daughter has super powers and some big corporation is hunting her down?”

“If that’s what it takes,” I said.

She leaned back against her locker and slid down until she was sitting on the ground. Her eyes began to fill with tears. I sat down next to her. Without looking at me she said, “I’m scared.”

“Listen,” I said. “My mother has been in tough spots before. She’ll know what to do. We’ll pick you up from cheerleading and we’ll figure it out tonight.”

Taylor wiped her eyes. “Okay. That’s a good plan.”

“Trust me, it will be okay.” I looked at the brochure again. “May I keep this?”

She nodded. I folded it up and put it in my pants pocket.

Just then a voice came over the PA system. “Michael Vey to the front office. Michael Vey.”

Taylor looked at me with wide eyes.

“What’s that about?” Ostin asked.

“I have no idea.”

14. A Change of Plans

I walked to the front office about as enthusiastically as a man on his way to the electric chair—and with about as much hope. I was ticking like mad—blinking and gulping. As I stood in the waiting room, the school secretary, Mrs. Hancock, walked out of Mr. Dallstrom’s office. She greeted me with a smile. “Hello, Michael,” she said. “Mr. Dallstrom will be right with you.”

I swallowed. I was afraid that was the reason they were calling me. I had no idea why Dallstrom wanted to see me—I hadn’t been shoved in a locker for days.

A moment later he came to his door. He was smiling, which looked frighteningly out of place, like lipstick on a pig.

“Michael, come in.”

“Yes, sir.” I followed him inside his office. He sat back in his chair and smiled again.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk.

“How’s school going?”

I looked at him, wondering if some alien being had taken over his body. I slowly sat down. “It’s fine.”

“Great. I just wanted to tell you that your detention has been canceled. I’m sorry about that little misunderstanding. And Jack and his cohorts will be doing their time. I guarantee they won’t be bothering you anymore.”

“Oh.” It was all I could think to say. “Thank you.”

He stood and walked around his desk to me, putting his hand on my shoulder. “Michael, we’re proud that you’re a member of our student body.”

Now I was certain I was being punked. “You are?”

“Absolutely we are.” Dallstrom leaned back against his desk. “Michael, I have some terrific news. Two of Meridian’s pupils have been awarded the prestigious C. J. Hatch Scholarship to the acclaimed Elgen Academy in Pasadena, California. And you are one of them.”

He stuck out his hand. “Congratulations.”

I gulped. How had they found both of us? I timidly offered my hand. When I could speak I asked, “Why me?”

“Why not you?” Dallstrom said. “Elgen Academy selects their elite student body using a closely guarded process that involves scholarship, citizenship, and character. I am told that this is the first time in the academy’s illustrious history that two students have been invited to the academy from the same city—let alone the same school. We are very proud indeed.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say hurray!” he said. “This is the chance of a lifetime! The academy’s board will be contacting your parents directly and extending the offer. I’m certain that they’ll be as proud and excited as we are.”

“It’s just my mom,” I said. I was suddenly very afraid for her.

“And, Michael, the best part is that your good fortune is shared by the entire student body of Meridian High. If you and the other student accept this remarkable offer, our school will be given a two-hundred-thousand-dollar grant to use however we best see fit.

We could restock our library, refinish the basketball court floor, procure new music stands, buy new wrestling mats, and still have plenty to go around.” He leaned forward. “This is the biggest thing ever to happen to Meridian High. Your picture will hang proudly on our Hall of Fame.”

“What if I can’t go,” I said.

His expression fell. “And pass up this incredible, once-in-a-life-time opportunity?” He leaned forward, looking at me with an expression that was oddly both friendly and threatening. “I’m sure we can count on you to do the right thing.”

I swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

“I better let you get back to class. Don’t want to stand in the way of our greatest student. Do you need a tardy slip?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think the bell’s rung yet.”

“Right you are. You can go. Have a great day.”

I walked out of his office more terrified than I had gone in.

Ostin and Taylor were waiting for me outside fifth-period biology. Taylor didn’t look like she felt well.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She had a hand on her right temple. “I’m just upset.”

“What happened?” Ostin asked. “Why did they call you down to the office?”

I was still processing everything, and I didn’t want to upset Taylor any more than she already was. “I’ll tell you later.”

Ostin’s brow furrowed. “Did you get in trouble?”

“I’ll tell you later,” I repeated.

“Let’s just go to class,” Taylor said. “I need to get my mind off of this.”

“Good idea,” I said.

Taylor didn't say much during biology. Actually she didn't say anything. She looked like it was all she could do to not go running out. More than anything I wanted to reach over and hold her hand. I didn't blame her for being afraid. I was afraid. Actually, I was terrified. I had no idea who those people were and what they would do.

I met Taylor in the hallway after class. "Are you all right?"

She nodded but said nothing. Ostin walked up. He looked as nervous as we were.

"You remember the plan?" I asked Taylor.

She nodded again.

"Okay," I said. "We'll pick you up at five."

"I'll meet you at the front of the school."

"Are your parents home?" I asked.

"They don't get home today until after five. Why?"

"Just in case my mother needs to talk to them."

"I hope not." She sighed. "I'll see you later."

"See you."

She turned and walked off to the gymnasium.

Ostin and I walked in the opposite direction out of the school.

We hadn't even left the schoolyard when I said to him, "I don't feel right about this. Maybe we should stay with her."

"That would seem weird."

“So?”

“If she’d wanted us to stay she would have asked.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re probably right.”

“So what did Dallstrom want?”

“I’ve been offered a scholarship to Elgen Academy.”

Ostin blanched. “Oh no.”

“It gets worse. They’ve bribed Dallstrom. They’ve offered the school two hundred thousand dollars if Taylor and I go.”

“You’ll have to change schools—Dallstrom will make your life miserable if you don’t go.”

“I know.”

“When are you going to tell your mom about all this?”

“I’m more worried about *what* to tell her. What if she wants me to go?”

“This is bad,” Ostin said, shaking his head. “Really bad.”

We walked the rest of the way home in silence.

My mother got home from work a few minutes later than she planned—around a quarter of five. She called as she opened the door,

“Michael, Ostin, you guys ready?”

“We’re over here, Mom.” We were sitting in front of the television watching the Discovery Channel. It was Shark Week.

“When is Taylor done?”

“She has cheerleading until five.”

“It’s almost five now,” she said. “We better hurry.”

Mom, Ostin, and I climbed into the Toyota and drove over to the school. My mom pulled up to the school’s front steps and put the car in park.

“Where are we meeting her?” my mom asked.

“She said she’d be in front,” I said.

“Maybe they’re running late,” Ostin said. “Or she went back inside.”

My mother said, “You two run in and see what’s up.”

I opened my door. “C’mon, Ostin.”

We ran up the stairs into the school’s main lobby but Taylor wasn’t there. We walked down to the gym. Inside, groups of cheerleaders were practicing stunts. I looked around but I couldn’t see Taylor. “Where is she, Ostin? Use your Tay-dar.”

“She’s not here,” he said.

“She has to be.”

“She’s not.”

Mrs. Shaw, the cheerleader advisor, was on the other side of the gym. I walked over to her. “Excuse me, Mrs. Shaw. Do you know where Taylor Ridley is?”

She looked up from her clipboard. “Taylor said she wasn’t feeling well, so she left early.”

“She walked home?”

“I don’t know. She might have called her parents.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Ostin and I walked out of the gym.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Ostin said. “Why didn’t she call?”

Just then I spotted Taylor’s friend Maddie. She was wearing gym clothes and walking down the hall texting. I called out to her. “Maddie!”

She looked up and smiled. “Hi Michael. How are you?”

“Fine. Have you seen Taylor? It’s really important that I find her.”

“She left practice early. She had a really bad headache.”

“Did you see her leave?”

“Yeah.”

“How was she acting?”

“Well, she was upset because of her headache.”

“Was she alone?”

She looked at me with an idiotic grin. “I’m not telling on her.”

“This isn’t a *thing*,” I said. I looked at her phone. “Look, will you call her? Please.”

“She never answers her phone. I’ll text her.”

“Great. Just ask her where she is.”

“Sure.” She thumb-typed a message. Less than a minute passed before her phone buzzed. “She’s at home.”

I felt some relief. “Tell her I’m here to get her and ask if I should come over.”

She began typing. Her phone buzzed again. “She says she’s sorry she forgot to call. She’s not feeling well and will have to pass on tonight, but happy birthday.” She looked at me. “I didn’t know it was your birthday. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.” I turned to Ostin. “At least she’s okay,” I said.

We walked back to the car and climbed in. My mom looked confused. “Where’s Taylor?”

“She went home early,” I said. “She had a headache.”

She looked as disappointed as I felt. “That’s too bad. Maybe next time.”

15. The Man Who Wore Sunglasses at Night

None of us spoke much as we drove downtown. I have to admit that Taylor's absence had dulled my excitement. I think even Ostin was upset.

When we got to the aquarium my mother looked at me and smiled sadly. "Let's have a good time, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

Even though it was a weekday, the aquarium was running a Family Night Special so the place was crowded. The busiest exhibit by far was the sharks, with their unblinking eyes and their teeth bared beneath them, gliding through the water just inches from the tank's glass, as if death were only a few inches away from you. I suppose that's how I felt about everything right now, as if something bad was circling just inches away, waiting to bite. I soon discovered that Ostin was feeling the same way.

"Do you think Taylor's safe?" he asked me.

"I don't know."

"Do you think we are?"

"Not if she isn't."

It was hard keeping my mind on the exhibits. The three of us wandered over by the electric eels. *Electrophorus electricus* are ugly creatures with little holes in their skin as if they'd all grown up with a bad case of acne. There were three eels in the tank and the largest was about six feet long with a dark gray back and an orange under-belly. There was a voltage meter connected to the outside of the tank with a red needle that occasionally bounced around as the eels sent out surges. Out of curiosity I slid my hand over to the metal corner of the tank and pulsed a little. The voltage meter jumped with my charge. Then, to my surprise, the eels in the tank all swam to me. I turned back to see if my mother had seen this but she was

looking through her purse. As I looked at her I wondered if I should tell her about Taylor and my invitation to the academy. I wasn't even sure where to start. A few minutes later I walked over to her.

Before I could say anything, Ostin said to my mother, "Did you know that electric eels are not really eels?"

"Really," she replied, no doubt prepared for Ostin's upcoming monologue. My mother always looked genuinely interested in what Ostin had to say, which was probably one of the reasons he had a crush on her—which, by the way, still grossed me out.

"They're a species of gymnotiformes, also known as knife fish. Biologically, they're closer to the carp or catfish than the eel. And they breathe air, so they have to come to the surface every ten minutes."

"I didn't know that."

"They are at the top of the food chain, which means they have no natural predators. In fact, even a baby electric eel can paralyze an alligator with its shock."

I knew most of this already. For obvious reasons, I had always taken great interest in electric eels. When I was nine I used to write "EEM"—secret for "Electric Eel Man"—on the corners of my papers, as if it were my secret identity. Still, I let Ostin talk. I think he would explode if he didn't.

"They're basically a living battery. Four-fifths of their body is used in producing or storing electricity. They can produce a charge up-wards of six hundred volts and five hundred watts, which is powerful enough to be deadly to a human. Though some experts claim they've produced up to eight hundred volts."

"I'd hate to take a bath with one," she said smiling.

"Or give a bath to one," I said.

She looked at me and grinned. When I was three years old I accidentally gave her a shock while she was bathing me. It knocked her over. It was pretty much showers after that.

“Eels use their electric shock to stun or kill their prey, but they can also use low voltage like radar to see in murky waters. It’s called electrolocation.”

“Sounds like electrocution,” I said.

“Not the same thing.”

“Speaking of eating,” my mother said, “is anyone getting hungry?”

That was one way of shutting Ostin up. “Is that a trick question?” he asked.

“I’m hungry,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “I’m starving. Off to PizzaMax.”

The pizzeria wasn’t actually called PizzaMax. Its real name was Mac’s Purple Pig Pizza Parlor and Piano Pantry, which is as dumb as it is long, but they have awesome pizza. My mother and I ate there the first week we lived in Idaho, and a few weeks later when she asked me where I wanted to eat, I only remembered the Mac’s part. The name stuck.

We ordered six pieces of cheesy garlic bread, an extra-large Mac’s Kitchen Sink pizza, which has every thing you could imagine on it (except anchovies—gross!), and a cold pitcher of root beer. While we were eating, my mom asked me, “What do Taylor’s parents do?”

“Her dad is a police officer. Her mom works at a travel agency.”

My mom nodded. “She’s a really nice girl. I hope she comes around again soon.”

“I hope she does too,” I said.

“Still like your watch?” my mother asked. I think she just wanted to see me smile again.

I held up my arm so she could see that I was wearing it. “Love it.”

I could tell this made her happy. She looked into my eyes. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You’re kind of quiet tonight.”

I was never very good at hiding things from my mother. “I guess I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Are you still upset about Taylor?”

I shrugged. “A little.”

She put her hand on my shoulder. “Things don’t always go as planned, do they? But in the end they seem to work out.”

“I suppose so,” I said. I hoped so.

We had been at PizzaMax for nearly an hour when Ostin excused himself to go to the bathroom. My mother smiled at me, then slid around the vinyl seat of our booth to get closer.

“Honey, what’s wrong? You’re really ticking.”

I slowly looked up at her. “Mr. Dallstrom called me down to his office today.”

Her brow fell. “Oh. What happened?”

“Nothing happened. I got offered a scholarship.”

A broad smile crossed her face. “What kind of scholarship?”

“It’s to this really prestigious school in California.”

“Michael, that’s wonderful. What’s the name of the school?”

I was relieved to see her happy. “The Elgen Academy.”

Her smile immediately vanished into a look of fear. “Did you say Elgen?”

Her expression frightened me. “Yeah.”

“In Pasadena?”

“How did you know that?” I asked.

She turned pale, like she was going to be sick.

“Mom, what is it?”

“We need to go,” she said, her voice quivering. “We need to get Ostin and leave now.”

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t tell you here . . .” She looked me in the eyes, her eyes dark with fear. “Michael, there’s more to this than you know. Your father . . .”

Just then Ostin returned. “I’m ready for another frosty mug of root beer,” he said.

I looked up at him. “We’ve got to go,” I said.

“Right now?”

“Right now,” my mother said. “Something’s come up.”

It was dark outside when my mother paid the bill. We were walking out to the car when Ostin said, “Wait. I forgot my jacket.”

“Hurry,” my mom said to him as he turned to run back inside. “I’ll pull up front.” We continued walking to the car.

My mother was unlocking our car door when a man appeared between our car and the truck next to it. His clothes were dirty and worn and his face was partially cloaked in a dark gray hoodie. He said to my mother, “Excuse me, do you have a dollar?”

My mother looked at him, then said, “Of course.” My mother always helped others. She lifted her purse.

When my mom’s head was down the man pulled a gun from the hoodie’s pouch. “Just give me the purse.”

My mother dropped her keys on the ground.

“Okay,” she said, her voice pitched. “You can have it. You don’t need the gun.”

“Shut up!” he said. “Just give it to me and shut your mouth. If anyone screams I shoot.”

“Don’t talk to my mother like that,” I said.

He pointed the gun at me. He looked nervous and was shaking.

“I’ll shoot you first.”

“Please,” my mother said, “just take the money.” She handed her purse to him. “Just take it. There’s credit cards and cash, you can have it all.”

He cautiously reached out and took the purse from her, the gun still shaking in his hand. He backed off again. “I want the car too,” he said. “Give me your keys and back away.”

“I dropped the keys,” my mother said. “They’re right there. I’m going to pick them up.”

“You don’t move,” he said, pointing the gun at my mother’s chest.

“You,” he said to me, “give me the keys.”

I looked at him, then my mother.

“Bring them to me now and I won’t shoot your mother.”

“Okay,” I said. I crouched down and lifted the keys, then slowly walked toward him. About a yard away from him, I turned back and looked at my mother.

“What are you doing?” he said angrily. “Give me the keys.”

My mother guessed what I was thinking. She shook her head.

I looked back at the man. Maybe I had watched too many superhero movies, but if ever there was a moment to use my power it was now. I could stop him from taking our car and my mother’s purse. I was handing him a ring of metal. All I had to do was surge.

I took another step forward, then slowly reached out with the keys. His hand shot out and grabbed them. The instant he touched the ring there was a loud snap and a yellow spark that briefly lit up everything around us. The man screamed out as he collapsed to the ground. There was a pale mist of smoke in the air from the shock.

For a moment it seemed that time stood still. I looked at my mother, wondering how she’d react. She was staring at the man on the ground. The silence was broken by a man’s voice. “Well done, Michael.”

I quickly turned around. I have no idea where he came from, but a man was now standing just a few yards from us. He was sharply dressed in a tan suit with an orange silk tie. Even though it was dark, he wore thick-framed sunglasses. His hair, dark brown with sideburns, was nicely styled. He looked at the man on the ground, then back up at me, and lightly clapped. “Really, that was impressive.

What was that—nine hundred, a thousand volts?”

I looked at my mother, then back at him anxiously.

“Who are you?” my mother asked.

“A friend, Sharon. A friend and an admirer of Michael’s. And his gift.” My mother and I exchanged glances. “Yes,” he said smiling, “I know all about it. As a matter of fact, I know more about it than you do.”

Just then the thief groaned and I looked down at him. He was struggling just to lift his head. As I watched him, anger flooded through my body. If I had ever wondered if my electrical powers were somehow connected to my emotions, there was no doubt of it now as I felt power surging through me like I had never felt before.

I looked down at my hands. Electricity was sparking in blue arcs between my fingers, something I’d never experienced before.

“It’s an emotional reaction,” the man said. “Fear, anger, hate—the powerful stuff causes your nervous system to react. It’s peculiar isn’t it? Normal people respond with adrenaline—but special people like you react electrically.”

My mother put her hand on my arm. “Michael, we need to go.”

I didn’t move. “How do you know all this?” I asked.

The man took a step forward. “Michael, we’ve been looking for you for a long, long time . . . almost since you were born.”

“Michael,” my mom said.

“Why?” I asked.

“To reunite you with the others.”

“Others?”

“You’re not alone, Michael. There’s more of your kind than you think. More than just your friend Taylor.”

His mention of Taylor made me feel even more confused.

“I’d like to introduce you to some of them right now. Behind you is Zeus.”

Suddenly a young man was standing next to my mother. He was good-looking but unkempt. He had long, greasy, blond hair and wore a Levi’s jacket with the sleeves cut off and no shirt underneath. Even though he was only my age he had a tattoo on his chest of a lightning bolt. My mother looked at him anxiously.

“And this is Nichelle.”

A young woman stepped up behind the man. She wore black clothing and dark, thick makeup, mostly black or dark purple, the way the Goth kids do. Both kids looked about my age, though Zeus was taller than me.

“Zeus, show Mrs. Vey what you can do.”

He smiled darkly. “Glad to.” He lifted his hands and electricity flew from his hands to my mother in blue-white strikes. My mother screamed and collapsed just like the man I had just shocked.

“Mom!” I dropped to the ground with her, cradling her head in my arms. “Why did you do that?” I shouted angrily.

“She’ll be okay,” the man said. “It just took the wind out of her.”

My eyes darted back and forth between the three of them. “Who are you?”

“I’m your friend,” the man said softly. “Nichelle?”

The girl started toward me. As she approached I noticed that the Zeus guy took a few steps back, as if he were afraid of her.

As the girl neared me I started to feel different. Everything was out of place, the man, the two kids, my mother on the ground, it was all like a bad dream. I felt weaker. The electricity stopped arcing between my fingers. Then I began to feel dizzy. I looked at the girl and she looked into my eyes with a strange, emotionless stare. I couldn't make sense of any of it—who these people were and why they were there. More importantly, what they wanted with us.

With each step the girl took toward me, my dizziness increased.

Then my head began to pound like a bass drum. I put my hand on my forehead as my vision began to blur.

“Take it easy on him, Nichelle,” I heard the man say. “He’s not used to it.”

Suddenly I heard Ostin’s voice, blending into what seemed like a collage of other sounds. I looked down at my mother. She was still, but gazing at me. I saw her lips move but I couldn’t hear her.

I couldn’t hear anything other than the loud buzzing in my ears. I think she said *I love you*. It seems like that’s what she said. It’s the last thing I remember before passing out.

16. Gone

When I woke I was in a bed with aluminum side rails. I was lying beneath clean, white sheets and there was an IV taped to my arm. I felt as if I had been drained of all my energy and every joint of my body ached, throbbing like a bad toothache. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the light above me. I groaned out, as if expulsing a nightmare. Ostin appeared at my side.

“Michael?”

I turned my head toward him. He was standing in front of closed blinds that glowed from the daylight behind them. Next to him were his mother and father. Ostin’s father was in charge of maintenance for the county’s parks and recreation, so he was rarely home. I was surprised to also see him in the room.

My tongue stuck to my dry mouth and it was difficult to speak.

“Where am I?”

“Honey, you’re in the hospital,” Mrs. Liss said. Her face was dark with concern.

“How did I get here?”

“Paramedics,” Ostin said.

“You passed out,” Mrs. Liss said. “The doctors were afraid you had a stroke.”

“Where’s my mother?”

“Do you remember what happened?” Mr. Liss asked.

It hurt my head to think about it. “There was a guy with a gun. Then this man with two kids. One of them shocked my mother.” I looked at Ostin.

“Did I dream that?”

He shrugged. “I only saw the gunman.”

“Is my mother okay?”

Ostin didn’t answer.

I turned to Mr. and Mrs. Liss. “She’s okay, isn’t she?”

Mrs. Liss walked closer and put her hand on mine. Her eyes were filled with tears. “I have some bad news, honey. Your mother’s gone.”

I looked at her blankly. “What do you mean?”

“The police believe she’s been kidnapped,” Mr. Liss said.

My heart froze. Kidnapped? “Why would someone kidnap her?”

“We don’t know.”

My body’s pain was nothing compared to the agony I now felt. Tears filled my eyes. How could this have happened? My mother had spent her life protecting and caring for me and now, I had failed to protect her. I had let her down. Why couldn’t they have just taken me? I wanted to fall asleep and wake up again in my own house, talking to my own mother. I wanted something to make sense. I wanted the nightmare to end.

17. Lieutenant Lloyd

That afternoon the police came to interview me. Mr. Liss had gone to work, leaving Ostin and his mother still with me. There were two policemen, both in uniform. The officer who did most of the talking was older, with gray hair.

“Michael, I’m Lieutenant Lloyd of the Boise Police Department. This is Detective Steve Pearson.”

Detective Pearson waved from behind. “Hello, Michael.”

“Hey,” I said.

Lieutenant Lloyd said to Ostin and his mother, “We have some questions for Michael. Would you mind waiting outside for a few minutes?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Liss said, putting her hand on Ostin’s back. “Let’s go, Ostin.”

Ostin looked at me sympathetically. “See ya, buddy.”

After we were alone, Lieutenant Lloyd walked to the side of my bed. He must have noticed my ticking because he said, “Don’t worry. We’re here to help.”

“I know,” I said.

He grabbed my bed’s railing with one hand. “I’m really sorry about what’s happened to your mother, son. The good news is we have the man who held you up in custody. We’re just trying to put the pieces together. I need you to tell me everything you remember about what happened.”

I closed my eyes. Remembering what happened was like pulling a Band-Aid off a bad cut. “I remember some,” I said.

“Please tell us what you remember.”

I rolled my tongue around inside my mouth. It felt thick and heavy. I was blinking pretty hard. “My mom had taken us out for pizza for my birthday. We had just finished eating and were walking out to our car . . .”

“You and your mother?” Detective Pearson asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. My friend Ostin was with us, but he went back inside to get his jacket.”

“Go on,” Lieutenant Lloyd said.

“My mom was unlocking the car when this guy was there.”

“The guy with the gun?”

I nodded.

“Clyde Stuart,” Detective Pearson said. “His name is Clyde Stuart. Where did he come from?”

“I don’t know. He was just between the cars. Neither of us saw him at first.”

“What did he do?” Lieutenant Lloyd asked.

“He asked for some money. When my mom went for her wallet, he pulled out a gun and asked for her purse.”

“Then what?”

“He told us to give him our car keys. I handed them to him.”

“Anything else?”

I shook my head. “That’s it.”

Lieutenant Lloyd looked at me with a perplexed expression, then turned back to his partner. Detective Pearson said, “What we can’t figure out is what happened to the suspect.”

I realized the gap in my story. My eyes darted nervously between them.
“What do you mean?”

“He was incapacitated when we arrived on the scene,” Pearson said. “He claims the keys shocked him.”

I blinked several times. “I don’t remember.”

“Stuart was acting like he’d been hit by a Taser,” Lieutenant Lloyd said.
“We had to carry him into the police cruiser.”

“Taser?” Pearson said. “It was more like he was struck by a bolt of lightning.”

“Maybe he was,” I said.

Lieutenant Lloyd wrote something on his pad. Then he said, “We’re wondering if the gunman had an accomplice. Was there anyone with him?”

“No.”

“Did you see anyone else around?”

“There was a man.”

Lieutenant Lloyd looked up from his pad. “What man?”

“I don’t know. Just a man. He was dressed in a suit. And he had a boy and a girl with him about my age.”

“Did he come from the pizza place?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“What did he look like? His face?”

“I’m not sure about that either. He was wearing sunglasses.”

“At night?” Pearson asked.

“Yeah. I thought it was weird.”

“What else do you remember about him?” Lloyd asked.

“He had short, dark brown hair. He looked . . . rich.”

“Definitely didn’t look like Stuart,” Lloyd said, jotting down more notes in his pad. “Did you see them take your mother?”

“No. I fainted or something.”

“Fear will do that,” Pearson said.

I didn’t think it had anything to do with fear, but I said nothing.

“Do you have any idea why someone would want to kidnap your mother?”

I shook my head. “No. Why don’t you ask Stuart?”

“We’ve interrogated him but he’s tight as a clam. We know he’s hiding something, but whomever or whatever he’s protecting has got a real hold on him. Apparently he’s a lot more afraid of them than he is of us.”

I tried not to tear up. “Will you find her?”

Lieutenant Lloyd looked at me sympathetically. “We’ll do our best. I promise.” He saw the anguish on my face and added, “We’re not done with Stuart yet. I’ve still got a few tricks up my sleeve.” He took a card from his front pocket. “Take this. It has my office and cell phone number. If you think of anything else just call me.” The two policemen started to leave the room. Lieutenant Lloyd stopped by the door. “Oh, by the way, the gun Stuart had was empty.”

“Empty?”

“No bullets. I thought it might make you feel a little better to know that he wasn’t intending to shoot you.”

He might as well, I thought.

The policemen walked out. Ostin rushed in as soon as they left.

“Do they know where your mother is?”

“No.” I lay back in bed. “What did you see?”

“Hardly anything. When I got to your car, you and that man were lying on the ground and your mom was gone. I didn’t see anyone else. I ran back to the restaurant and told them to call the police.”

“There were three people besides the gunman. A man in sunglasses and two kids our age. The man knew my name. He knew my mom’s and Taylor’s names. He knew about my power.”

Ostin scratched his head. “How could he have known all that?”

“I don’t know.”

“He brought his kids?”

“I don’t think they were his. And they had electrical powers. At least one of them did. The man called him Zeus. He’s the one who shocked my mom.”

“He could shock like you?”

“Sort of. Except his electricity left his body. Like lightning.” I leaned forward. “There’s something else I remember. He seemed afraid of the girl.”

“What did she do?”

“I don’t know. But the closer she got to me the dizzier I felt. Then I passed out.” I combed my hair back from my face. “They’re not going to find my

mother.”

“Don’t talk that way.”

“Have you heard from Taylor?”

“No, not yet.”

I lay back in bed. “At least she’s safe. It’s a good thing she didn’t come with us.”

PART TWO

18. Kidnapped

Taylor shook with fear in the backseat of the utility van. Her head still ached, as did her hands, which were strapped in front of her with plastic ties. She felt as if she'd been drugged. A leather strap crossed at her waist, holding her tightly to the seat, and her legs were bound at her ankles with leather shackles fastened to the floor. The van appeared to have been designed for this very purpose—transporting prisoners. On top of her fear, she felt carsick and wondered if she might throw up.

It had all happened so fast. She had been at cheerleading practice for only a few minutes when she came down with an excruciating headache and had to sit down. After ten minutes Mrs. Shaw suggested she go home. That was when Taylor first noticed the scary-looking girl watching her from the gym door. At first she went outside and sat on the concrete steps waiting for Michael, hoping the pain would go away. She noticed that the scary girl followed her at a distance.

Then the pain got so severe that Taylor knew she couldn't wait any longer for Michael, so she began walking home. She was crossing the school's back parking lot when a white van pulled up beside her—the van she was held captive in. Taylor had thought the van was one of the school's food service vehicles and she hadn't paid much attention until it stopped, the side door swung open, and the scary-looking girl—the same girl who now sat next to her—stepped out. Taylor's first thought was *Why is that girl wearing a dog collar?*

Her headache immediately intensified until she fell first to her knees, then to all fours, dizzy and disoriented.

“Take it easy!” someone shouted. Then a man got out from the front of the van and stood next to her. “Are you okay?”

“I don't think so,” Taylor said.

“Let me give you a hand.”

Her head was spinning, and the buzzing in her ears was so loud that she didn't resist the two men picking her up and carrying her inside the van, blindfolding her, and strapping her down to the backseat.

Then someone put something over her mouth and nose. That's the last thing she remembered. She wondered if anyone had seen her being kidnapped and called the police. Maybe her father was coming for her right now. She desperately hoped so, but doubted it. The whole thing had taken less than thirty seconds. She had been taken without even a scream.

Heavy rock music played from the front of the van. Earlier, when Taylor woke, her captors were arguing over whether to listen to classic rock or rap. They flipped a coin to decide. Classic rock had won out, and Aerosmith was playing, adding to her headache. The scary-looking girl sat alone on the bench in front of her. The girl was about her age, though a little shorter. She had short, black spiky hair streaked with purple, black makeup, and she wore a black leather collar around her neck, studded with what looked like real diamonds. She had earbuds in both ears, the white cord running down her neck.

For the last hour Taylor had tried to reboot the driver, even though she knew it would likely result in crashing the van. A crash would, at least, draw outside attention and she'd rather take her chances with an accident than with these people. But her attempts to reboot him were only met with pain—a sharp prick in her temples. Taylor decided to ignore the pain and try rebooting again with all her might. She pressed the thought, but the pain just grew. It was like sticking pins into her own head. She finally groaned out and stopped.

The girl in front of her turned around and removed one of the buds from her ear. "I'd tell you to stop doing that except it feels kind of good."

"Doing what?" Taylor asked, her head still throbbing.

"Whatever it is that you do to people's brains."

Taylor looked at her. "How do you know what I'm doing?"

“I can feel it. But you’re wasting your time. It doesn’t hurt me and it won’t get past me.”

“Who are you?”

“Nichelle,” she said. “I’d shake your hand, but”—she paused and smiled—“you’re tied up.” Her smile fell into a dark glare. “Actually, I wouldn’t shake your hand anyway, and the better question is, what am I?”

“What are you?”

“I’m your worst nightmare. Just think of me as an electrical vampire. And girl, I could feed off you all day.” The girl put the earbud back in and turned around.

Taylor had never before felt so helpless or afraid. She thought of Michael and his mother waiting for her; she thought of her parents. They probably hadn’t noticed her absence yet, thinking that she’d gone with Michael and his mother. It wouldn’t be until late that evening that they started worrying. Her mother would be a wreck and her father would be following up on every resource available to a police officer, but by then she’d be long gone, maybe even out of the state. She wanted to be home with all of her heart.

“Why does my head hurt?”

“That’s me. Letting you know I’m here.” She smiled. “I can increase the pressure if you like.”

“No thank you.”

“I thought you might say that.” Nichelle turned completely around and looked into Taylor’s eyes. The pain started increasing, higher, then higher.

Taylor shouted out, “Stop. Please.”

The girl was enjoying herself. “Hurt, don’t it.”

Taylor’s eyes filled with tears. “Yes.”

The pain stopped. “See, I’m what an electrician would call a ground wire. I just soak up all those lovely powers of yours until we can get you to where you’re going.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. Don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“Why do I feel so sick?”

“Funny you should ask. The scientists at Elgen wondered that same thing. They think it’s because your body has become so used to high levels of electricity that you don’t feel normal without it. That’s what makes me so darn annoying.”

“Elgen? Are we going to the Elgen Academy?” Taylor asked.

“So you don’t want to be surprised, eh? Okay then, we’re going to the labor-a-tory,” she said, purposely drawing out the word like she was a mad scientist. Taylor couldn’t tell if she was trying to sound comical or scary, but it didn’t matter. Either way, it was scary.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Same thing scientists always do with lab animals—poke and prod around, and when they’re done, they’ll dissect you like a frog in a middle school biology class.”

Pure fear passed through Taylor. “Why? I haven’t done anything.”

Nichelle shrugged, “Why not?” She leaned back. “You ask too many questions. They’re hurting my ears. Like this . . .”

Suddenly a painful, high-pitched squeal tore through Taylor’s head. She started crying. “Stop it. Please, stop it.”

“Say ‘pretty please.’”

“Pretty please.”

““With sugar on top.””

Taylor sobbed. “With sugar on top.”

Nichelle smiled. “Good girl.” The pain ceased. “Now, no more talking. You just be real quiet there and in the future, should I ask you something, you will refer to me as ‘Master.’ You got that?”

Taylor just looked at her.

The girl’s eyes narrowed. “I asked you a question.”

Taylor’s head started filling with the noise. “Yes, Master.”

“Very good.”

Nichelle gave Taylor a big grin, turned back around, replaced the earbud, and lay back. “I love the abductions,” she muttered. “It’s the only time I can do whatever I want without getting in trouble. It’s been a long time since any fresh Glows have been brought in.”

A voice up front said, “Knock it off, Nichelle.”

She pulled out an earbud. “You’re no fun. It’s boring back here. I could make her bark like a dog or do something really embarrassing.”

“Just leave her alone.”

She turned around and said to Taylor, “These old dudes have no sense of humor. By the way, you should have seen what I did to that boy you led us to. Vey. He had a lot of electricity in him. Much more than usual. When I shut him down, I almost killed him. He’s probably still in the hospital.”

“You have Michael?”

“I can’t hear you,” she sang. She winked. “You didn’t say ‘Master.’”

“I’m sorry,” Taylor said quickly, afraid she might hurt her again.

“You have Michael, Master?”

Nichelle smiled. “No. The little guy’s friend showed up and we had to go. But we’ll have him soon enough. We took a little insurance. You and his dearest mumsy.”

“You have Mrs. Vey, Master?”

“Yes, we do.”

A sharp voice came from the front. “Nichelle, just shut up.”

Nichelle leaned toward Taylor. “Now look what you did. You got me in trouble.” She turned back to the front. “Oh, chill. It’s not like she’ll ever get the chance to tell anyone.” She shook her head.

“Idiots,” she said under her breath, once again replacing the earbud.

“No more talking.” She leaned her head against the interior metal wall of the van.

Taylor tried to keep from crying. She was in pain and frightened.

She wondered if what the girl had told her about the laboratory was true. Would they really cut her open? As frightened as she was to find out, she had to know. She leaned her head against the van’s wall to read Nichelle’s mind. She saw images of the school from the brochure, she saw other youths her age, some of them well dressed and laughing, and she knew Nichelle hated these kids. She saw something she didn’t understand—she saw herself at the school interacting with the other students as if it had already happened. Was she seeing the future? Then she saw other youths lying on the ground, some in pain, others crying in a dark place that looked like a dungeon. She sat back up, unable to continue. Everything she saw in Nichelle’s mind terrified her.

19. Taylor's Arrival

The van drove through the night, and Taylor slept for most of the ride, waking only when a voice came over the two-way radio up front or when the van stopped for gas. Taylor was given no food and only a bottle of water that Nichelle held for her to drink, purposely spilling a good portion of it down the front of her shirt and jeans.

“Ugh, you wet yourself.”

Taylor had no idea where they were or where they were going.

The ride was mostly through desert until early the next morning, when they came again into city traffic.

Around 2 p.m. the van pulled into a driveway with a guard booth and a tall gate lined with razor wire. The driver rolled down his window and showed the guard a badge, and the gate opened. They drove around to the back of the building, where a large overhead garage door lifted, and the van pulled inside. When the overhead door had closed behind them, the men climbed out and one of them opened the side door. Nichelle stepped out, then leaned against the van, stretching her legs. “Hurry this up. I have to pee.”

“Don't get your panties in a bunch,” one of the men said. “Just stay close.”

“What would you boys do without me?” she said. “Ain't it awful? Can't live with me, can't shoot me.”

“Don't tempt me,” one of them said.

One of the men took out a pocketknife and cut the band around Taylor's feet, undid the strap around her waist, and pulled her forward. Taylor ducked down as she stepped out of the van to the orange-yellow painted concrete floor of the garage. She was trembling with fear, and felt like her legs might give out on her.

“Hatch says to take her into the infirmary to get checked out,” the guard at the door said to the driver.

Nichelle and one of the drivers took Taylor inside the building and down a well-lit corridor to a room at the end of the hall.

The sign on the door said exam room b. Upon their entrance, a tall woman with cropped yellow hair, thin rimmed glasses, and wearing a white lab coat looked up from her desk.

“This is Taylor Ridley?” she asked the man.

“Yes. Sign here,” he said, thrusting out a clipboard. The woman signed the document, then handed the clipboard back to the driver.

“Muchas gracias,” he said, and walked away.

The doctor looked up at Taylor. “So you’re Taylor.”

Taylor swallowed. “Yes, ma’am. Where am I?”

“I’ll ask the questions,” she said sharply. “You’re in my office. I’m Dr. Parker, the resident physician at the Elgen Academy.” The woman turned to Nichelle. “Tell Miss Ridley what happens if she doesn’t cooperate.”

“She knows,” Nichelle said. “Don’t you?”

Taylor nodded.

The doctor walked behind Taylor and cut off the plastic cuffs with a pair of surgical scissors. Taylor brought her hands forward and rubbed her wrists.

“Thank you,” Taylor said.

“Take off your clothes.”

For a moment Taylor just stood there, then a sharp pain pierced her skull. “Stop! I’ll do it,” Taylor said quickly.

She undressed down to her underwear. She didn't know if they'd make her take everything off, but she wasn't going to until they made her. To her relief, they didn't.

"Lay your clothes on the chair."

"Yes, ma'am."

The doctor lifted a tablet computer from her desk. "Relax," she said in a tone that only made Taylor more uncomfortable. "We're just giving you a routine physical examination to see how healthy you are. Step onto the scale."

Taylor did as she was told. The doctor checked the number on the scale and wrote on her pad. Most of what the doctor asked Taylor to do was no different than when her mother took her to her own doctor for her annual physical, with one exception. She had Taylor stand against the wall and grasp two chrome bars. Then the doctor put on a thick pair of sunglasses. "I'm going to ask Nichelle to leave for a moment," she said. "Are you going to behave yourself? Or do I need to bring in a guard?"

"I'll behave, ma'am," Taylor said, looking at the ground.

She nodded to Nichelle. "Stay close."

"Yes, ma'am." Nichelle walked out of the room.

The doctor said to Taylor, "This device tests your electrical pulse."

Taylor remained silent. After a moment the doctor explained, "The electric children have a secondary pulse. Actually, it's more of an EKG."

"Why did you make her leave?" Taylor asked.

"Nichelle distorts the readings."

When she was done running the test, the doctor punched a series of numbers into a machine that spit out a roll of paper. "I shouldn't be

surprised by this,” she said. “Your readings are identical to your sister’s.”

“I don’t have a sister,” Taylor said.

The doctor looked at her with a peculiar gaze but said nothing.

She walked to her desk and pushed the talk button on the intercom.

“Nichelle, come in, please.”

Nichelle walked back into the exam room. Taylor immediately recoiled with fear.

The woman gave Taylor a thin cloth jumpsuit. “Put this on.”

Taylor stepped into it and zipped it up, noticing the plastic zipper and snaps.

”Nichelle,” the doctor said, “it’s time for Miss Ridley’s interview.

Take her to her cell.”

20. A Surprise Visit

I was released from the hospital around six o'clock. A social worker from the state had come to my room to talk with me, and it was agreed that for the time being I would stay with the Lisses. We stopped at McDonald's for dinner, then drove to Ostin's house.

Mrs. Liss had always been nice but tonight she was especially kind. As we walked into the apartment, Mrs. Liss said, "Michael, honey, you can get your things and bring them over. You and Ostin can share a room for the time being."

"I'd like to stay in my own room for now, if that's okay."

She thought about it. "It is just down the hall. I guess that'll be all right. Take this with you." She took a bag of red licorice from her pantry and handed it to me. "It will help."

"Thanks."

"Want me to come over with you?" Ostin asked.

"Thanks, but not now."

He patted me on the back. "I understand." He's probably the only fifteen-year-old in the world who would. I walked down the hall. I unlocked the door, walked into the dark apartment and flipped on the lights. Since we moved to Idaho I had spent a lot of time alone, but the apartment had never seemed so quiet and empty. I looked down at my birthday watch, then I twisted it around on my wrist.

My eyes teared up. Where was she? I went into my mother's bedroom. There was a picture on her nightstand of the two of us at Zion National Park in southern Utah. It had been a beautiful day, and Kolob Arch could be seen in the distance behind us. As I picked up the photograph I wondered if I would ever see her again. My heart ached. I lay on her bed and cried.

Sometime in the next hour there was a knock on the door. I wiped my eyes and walked out. I had assumed it was Ostin, but to my surprise Taylor's dad and a woman I guessed was her mother stood in the hallway. They looked very upset.

Officer Ridley spoke first. "Hi Michael, we're Taylor's parents. Could we speak with you?"

I looked at them nervously, reacting with my usual tics. I assumed they were here to talk to me about my mother. "Sure," I said, stepping back from the door. "Come in."

Mrs. Ridley's eyes were puffy. Taylor's father put his arm around her, and they walked inside, shutting the door behind them.

"Is Taylor okay?" I asked.

Mrs. Ridley began to cry. Mr. Ridley said, "When was the last time you heard from Taylor?"

"Yesterday afternoon. She was going to go with us to the aquarium. But when we got to the school she was gone."

Mrs. Ridley began to cry harder.

"What's happened?" I asked.

"You haven't heard from her?" Mr. Ridley asked.

"No, sir."

He looked at me suspiciously. "Then you didn't know that Taylor ran away?"

My heart froze. "No. Why would she do that?"

He shook his head. "You know, I'm tough on her sometimes. I just . . ." He paused, overcome by emotion. "I told her that if she didn't start spending

more time at home she would have to give up cheerleading.” He rubbed his palm over his eyes. “She texted her good-bye.”

“We just didn’t see it coming,” Mrs. Ridley sobbed.

“She won’t return our texts,” her father said. He took his wife’s hand. “We wanted to ask you a favor. We just want her home and safe. Will you please tell her that we love her, and we would really like to talk to her?”

“If I hear from her,” I said. I felt sick but knew I couldn’t show it.

“But I’m sure she has a lot of other friends she’d contact first.”

“Then you have no plans to see her?” Mr. Ridley asked. There was a strong inflection in his voice.

“No. I haven’t heard from her since yesterday.”

They were both looking at me with a peculiar gaze. Finally Mrs. Ridley said, “An hour ago she sent another text that said ‘Tell Michael I’ll see him soon.’”

Chills went up my spine. When I could speak I said, “I don’t know what she meant by that, but if I hear from her I’ll call you. I promise.”

They both sat looking at me, and I guessed they were trying to decide whether I was telling the truth or not. Finally Mr. Ridley said, “Thank you, Michael.” They stood and walked to the door.

Mrs. Ridley stopped in front of my door, blotting her eyes with a Kleenex. “I don’t know if you know this, but Taylor was adopted.”

“She told me.”

“The counselors told us that sometimes adopted children can carry a sense of abandonment. We tried to fill that, but I guess we failed.”

“I don’t think you failed,” I said. “There must be some kind of misunderstanding.”

“That’s kind of you to say, Michael. Taylor thinks a lot of you. I think if you told her that we love her, she’ll believe you. I think she might come back.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I do know that Taylor loves you both. I’ll let you know if I hear from her.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Ridley said. Mr. Ridley put his arm around her and led her out of my apartment.

As soon as they were gone I ran down the hall and knocked on Ostin’s door. Ostin answered the door holding a half-eaten toaster strudel. He read the panic on my face.

“What’s wrong?”

“They’ve got Taylor.”

21. Dr. Hatch and the Twin

The cell Taylor was placed in was windowless and rectangular, with the walls, ceiling, and floor lined in a soft, pinkish rubber coating that resembled the material that pencil erasers are made of. Mounted to each wall were surveillance cameras, speaker boxes, and other sensors designed to monitor the cell's occupant's activities. On one wall were two chrome bars that stuck out about six inches from the wall—similar to the testing apparatus in the exam room. In one corner of the room there was a porcelain toilet and sink. The only thing that looked normal was the bed, which was on a wood frame.

Taylor walked over to the bed. She saw that there was no metal of any kind used in its construction. The box springs were made from plastic and the mattress filled with down feathers. The bed had one other difference she didn't fail to notice: leather restraining straps.

The room was lit by fluorescent lighting concealed behind thick plastic plates. There was neither a thermostat nor switches in the room of any kind, and she had no control over light, heat, or air.

The people watching her from the cameras would decide when she would have lights and how hot or cold she would be. She had no control over anything.

Taylor turned on the sink and was pleased that water came out.

She still felt nauseous from the car ride, and she washed her face in the cold water. Then she went and lay on her bed, looking up at the ceiling.

She wasn't sure what time it was. She wasn't even sure what day it was. Mrs. Shaw would be furious with her for missing cheer. Taylor shook her head. Had she not been so afraid, she would have laughed at the thought. If only Mrs. Shaw was the worst of her worries. Besides, everyone would know by now that she had been abducted.

They had to, didn't they? Her friends would be calling each other, they'd organize search parties. Wouldn't they?

She thought of how worried her parents must be. Just a few days earlier they had scolded her for being gone from home too much.

The argument had ended with her slamming her bedroom door. She regretted how she had acted. She'd give up everything she had to be home right now. Even cheerleading.

As Taylor lay on top of the bed thinking, she heard a quick burst of air followed by a sharp metallic click. Her door opened. Nichelle stepped inside, a tall man in a suit and tie behind her. He wore over-sized black-rimmed glasses with dark lenses that concealed his eyes, similar to the glasses the doctor had put on during her tests.

"Sit up," Nichelle barked.

Taylor sat up on the bed. The man walked to the center of the room. "Hello, Taylor," he said. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

Taylor stared at him, her heart pounding loudly with fear.

"He said 'hello,'" Nichelle said. A sharp piercing scream entered Taylor's head.

Taylor grabbed her ears and let out a small scream. "Stop!"

"Stop it," the man said sharply to Nichelle. "Go."

Nichelle frowned. "Yes, sir." She walked out of the room without looking at Taylor.

"I'm sorry about that," the man said. "Nichelle gets a bit Draconian."

"I hate her," Taylor said. She immediately regretted this, wondering if she'd be punished.

To her surprise, the man just nodded. “Be assured that you’re not alone in that,” he said. “Most of the students here do.” He smiled warmly. “Let’s start over. I’m Dr. Hatch. You are at the Elgen Academy. I hope your trip here wasn’t too unpleasant.”

Taylor looked at him incredulously. “Why have you kidnapped me? You can’t hold me here. My father will find you and—”

He raised his hand. “Your adopted father, Dean Charles Ridley of the Boise Police Department, thinks his little girl has run away. In fact you have already texted him twice today telling him how much you dislike him, and how you never intend to go home as long as he’s there.”

Hearing this made her heart ache. Taylor began to cry. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Taylor, I’m sorry it had to begin this way. I really am. But once you see things for what they really are, I promise you won’t be upset anymore.” He stepped toward her and crouched down to look into her face. “Do you know how long I have been looking for you? You’re a very special girl. Not just because you’re a Glow, but because you have something that we can’t learn from the other Glows.”

“What’s a Glow?”

“That’s our term for the electric children. You all give off that faint glow. Surely you’ve noticed it.”

She didn’t answer.

“Of course you have. Anyway, that’s why I wear these glasses.” He took them off and held them up so Taylor could see. “We invented them right here. They are especially designed to magnify that glow. I can spot one of you a mile away. Actually, 1.7 miles to be exact.”

He rubbed his eyes, then he looked into her eyes and smiled. “Taylor, you’re a very special girl, and part of something that’s bigger and more

exciting than you can imagine. We have a chance to change the world. I don't mean slap a Band-Aid on it; I mean throw the past out and start fresh. We could create a society where everyone has enough to eat, sufficient medical care, and housing. A world where life is about personal growth and expression, not survival. No more wars. No more hunger. A world where all your needs are met. And you can be a part of its creation."

"What are you talking about?"

"We are creating a world of people just like you—a race of superior beings." He let the statement ring off in the silence. "Taylor, do you know why you are electric?"

"Because your machine didn't work right."

He nodded. "Very good. Exactly. You see, some people, particularly some investors, saw that as a failure. But they missed the bigger vision. We discovered something much, much more valuable. You know, many of the great inventions of our day were accidents. Microwave ovens, penicillin . . ." He smiled. "Even potato chips."

Taylor said, "You killed all those babies."

Hatch stood. "I didn't," he said sharply. "The machine did. Accidentally. Accidents with machines happen every day, don't they?"

Let's keep things in perspective, Taylor. During that time frame, more babies died in car accidents on the California roads than were harmed by our machine. But you don't hear an outcry about that, do you? You don't accuse the car salesmen or automotive engineers of being mass murderers, do you? Of course not. Accidents are the price of civilization. Blood oils social progress. Sure, it was awful, but was it worth it? Believe me, it was." He looked carefully into her eyes to see if she was buying his argument. He decided she wasn't. "Still, it was unfortunate. And that's where you can help us—and help save the lives of future babies. Would you like to help save babies' lives, Taylor?"

Taylor swallowed.

“Would you?”

“Yes,” she said softly.

“I thought so. You’re a good girl. I like that about you.” He leaned toward her. “We want to study you to see why you lived and they didn’t. You can help us learn what’s the difference between your body and theirs. If we can isolate that factor, we can create electric children without endangering their lives. And you, Taylor, hold a very special key to that discovery—something that the other Glows can’t help us with. Do you want to know what that is?”

Taylor slowly nodded.

“You did well in science,” Hatch said. “I’ve seen your transcripts. You got an A- on Mr. Poulsen’s last biology test. Not bad. So you know that one of the tools we scientists use to study genetics is identical twins. Especially those who have been separated from each other at birth. It teaches us things about genetic influences versus environmental factors—what you’re born with compared to what you pick up along the way. You, Taylor, are one of those identical twins.”

“I’m not a twin.”

“Au contraire,” Hatch grinned. “I’d like you to meet someone.” He turned back toward the door. “Nichelle, please ask Tara to come in.”

At his command, a girl stepped into the room. Taylor froze. The girl looked exactly like her. Before she could say a word, Tara walked up to her and smiled. “Hi, sis.”

Taylor’s eyes darted back and forth between Hatch and Tara. “I don’t understand.”

Hatch smiled. “Ah, the learning begins. There are a lot of things you don’t understand yet,” Hatch said. “But you will.” He smiled at Tara. “Have a seat, Tara. Just there on the bed.”

“Thank you.”

Hatch’s voice came softer, almost gentle. “Taylor, you were born a twin. When your biological mother, a teenage girl named Gail Nash of Monrovia, California, gave you up for adoption, Tara was the first to be adopted. She went to a home right here in Pasadena just three miles from the academy—right here in our own backyard. We found her almost nine years ago.”

He looked at Tara, who nodded enthusiastically. “Nine years this coming June.”

Taylor just stared at the girl in astonishment. Could this be some kind of trick?

“You, Taylor, on the other hand, were adopted by a family in another state. And everyone knows how inefficient government bureaucrats can be. Your records were lost in the transfer between state agencies. You vanished like a grain of rice in a rice patty. We might never have found you had you not come looking for your birth records.”

Taylor felt sick. Ostin was right; she had exposed them.

“There were seventeen electric children. We had located them all except for two. You and Michael Vey.”

Taylor jumped when he said Michael’s name.

Hatch smiled. “Yes, you know Michael, don’t you?”

She didn’t answer.

“Don’t worry. You did him a favor by leading us to him. We might never have found him without you.”

She felt even worse. “He’s here?”

“Not yet. But he soon will be. In fact, he doesn’t know it yet, but he’s about to start planning his trip to see us.” He turned to Tara.

“That’s all for now. Why don’t you come back a little later and show Taylor around.”

She stood. “Okey-dokey.” She smiled at Taylor. “It’s so exciting to finally see you. You’re going to love it here. We’re contributing to the world in a way you never dreamed possible. And Dr. Hatch is the smartest man alive.” Tara looked back at Hatch and he nodded his approval.

“There are some really cool benefits to being here, like we’re not treated like children. Also, we have family vacation twice a year. I’ve been all around the world. And we get cool presents.” She flashed her diamond watch. “How many fifteen-year-olds have a twenty-three-thousand-dollar diamond Rolex watch?”

“Thank you, Tara,” Hatch said. “You can tell her all about it later.”

“I’ve gotta go. I’m so glad you found us. I’ve waited years for us to be together. Ciao!”

She walked out of the room.

“Beautiful girl,” Hatch said. “Of course, you know that, since you’re an exact replica.” He leaned forward, his face taking a gentle demeanor. “So let me tell you what you can expect while you’re here. Over the next few days we’ll be doing some general kinds of physiological testing. Basic stuff—blood work, an electrocardiogram, and a full body scan. We also have some special tests we’ve designed to help understand your special gifts. Nothing painful; we just want to make sure you’re healthy. The doctors out there don’t understand special individuals like you, and so they miss things. We’ve already saved the lives of some of your colleagues.”

“I just want to go home.”

Hatch moved closer to her. “Taylor, I know it’s hard right now. You’ve been plucked from all you know like a rose from a weed patch. Change is always hard, but that doesn’t mean it’s not good. Usually the hard things in our life lead to good.”

Taylor wiped her eyes. “You’re not going to let me go home?”

“Look, just five minutes ago you didn’t even know that you have a sister, and now you do. And soon your friend Michael will be joining us. You need to stop thinking of this as an abduction, and think of it as a long-awaited homecoming—a family reunion, if you will. This is your home.”

“For how long?” Taylor asked.

Hatch looked at her with a perplexed gaze. “For the rest of your life.”

PART THREE

22. The Revelation

One thing I knew about Ostin, if he didn't understand something, his brain attacked it without ceasing, comparing facts and calculating figures with the intensity of a computer-processing chip. Around nine-thirty at night his break-through came. He was lying on the couch in my front room, staring at the ceiling as I paced from one side of the room to the other like a caged leopard.

"I just don't get it," I said. "How did they know who I am? How did they know about our powers?"

Ostin was quiet for another minute, then he suddenly shouted, "That's it!"

"*What's it?*"

He jumped up from the couch. "I've been trying to figure out why they came after you at all. You weren't looking for those records." He looked at me, his eyes wide with excitement. "It's because they don't care about the records."

"What do you mean?"

"They're not trying to hide the information about what their machine did. They're looking for the survivors. And when they found Taylor they found you!"

"I'm not following you."

"Look, these guys have all the records of every baby who survived. What if those other children all had powers like yours and Taylor's? If they discovered that their machine gave those babies special powers, that could be worth billions."

"That's a big 'if,'" I said.

“Is it? You said the other kid, Zeus, shocked your mother, right? So we know there’s at least one other”—he spoke the word cautiously—“mutant.

“The only other people we know who were born at that hospital at that time have electrical powers. So statistically, we’re batting a thousand. There were seventeen children who survived. Maybe they all have powers.”

He paused, waiting for the last of the puzzle pieces to come together. Then he pounded the palm of his hand with his fist. “It was a fake.” Ostin looked at me the way he did when he solved a difficult math problem. “The whole thing with the gunman was fake. It was a test.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Because you don’t pick up an electric eel without getting shocked. They first had to see what you could do. You said the man in the sunglasses appeared after you shocked the gunman, right?”

“That’s right. And he said, ‘Well done, Michael.’” I stopped pacing.

“You might be on to something. He knew my name and what I did. And Clyde . . .”

“Who’s Clyde?”

“He’s the gunman. I remember thinking that he looked really nervous, like he didn’t want to be there. He was shaking like crazy. And his gun didn’t even have bullets.” I looked down. “But then why did they take my mom and not me?”

“Maybe they wanted to take both of you, but didn’t get the chance. You said you heard me coming, right?”

“Right.”

“But they were gone by the time I returned. They must have run out of time. They already had your mother, so they took her and ran.”

“Which means they’re probably still looking for me.”

“They don’t have to,” Ostin said.

“What do you mean?”

“They have your mother. They know you’ll come looking for them.” He looked in my eyes. “Whoever took your mom took Taylor. So if we can find one of them, we can find the other.”

I suddenly had a flash of inspiration. “Wait. I think I know where Taylor is.”

“Where?”

“The academy.”

I ran into my bedroom and found the brochure Taylor had given me from her locker. I brought it back out to the front room and spread it open on the counter. “Here. It’s got to be the place. Or at least it’s connected.”

Ostin looked at the brochure. “Five-Thirteen Allen Avenue, Pasadena, California.” He looked up. “I think you’re right. I’m betting that the Elgen Academy is really just for kids with electrical powers.”

Ostin’s logic made sense to me. Why else would they offer a scholarship to me when there were hundreds of kids with better grades? “You could be right,” I said.

“Now what?” Ostin asked.

“We tell the police,” I said.

Ostin shook his head. “No way. They’ll never believe us.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“Think about it. Two teenagers walk into a police station and tell them that a secret agency is kidnapping mothers and cheerleaders?”

Hearing it like that did sound crazy.

“But we have proof,” I said.

“No, we have a hunch and some articles on the Internet. They’ll think we’re crazy. And even if we somehow convinced them to look into it, this is a multibillion-dollar company. If they find anyone snooping around they’ll just move your mom and Taylor and then we have nothing.” Ostin stood and began to pace. “We need to know more about our enemy. But it’s not like they’re going to have a Facebook profile. Where do we learn more?”

“Clyde, the gunman,” I said.

“But he’s in jail.”

“Lieutenant Lloyd could get us to him.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He said their first interrogation was worthless. Maybe I can convince him that I might be more effective.” I brought out the card Lieutenant Lloyd had given me. “I’m going to call him.” I immediately went to the phone and dialed Lloyd’s cell phone number.

A gruff voice answered. “This is Boyd.”

His full name was Boyd Lloyd? No wonder he went by Lieutenant.

“Lieutenant Lloyd, this is Michael Vey.”

“Michael. What can I do for you?”

I had been so eager to call him that I had dialed without thinking about what I was going to say. “I, uh, just had a thought. You said you had spoken to the gunman, but he didn’t say much.”

“No, he was as tight as pantyhose on a hippo.”

“I was wondering if maybe he would talk to me.”

“You want to speak with Clyde?”

“Well, maybe seeing me might make him talk.”

There was a long pause. “Frankly, we couldn’t do much worse than we did with his last interrogation. Hold on, I’m going to call my partner. May I call you back at this number?”

“Yes,” I said. “Bye.” I hung up the phone.

“What’s up?” Ostin asked. “Why did you hang up?”

“He wants to talk to his partner.”

About ten minutes later my phone rang. “Michael, it’s Lieutenant Lloyd.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I spoke with my partner. He thinks there’s a chance it might work—a small chance, but worth trying. So if you’re willing to face Clyde, I say let’s go for it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“What time are you available?”

“Any time is good. I’m not back to school yet.”

“Then how about I pick you up in the morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have your address on the police report. I’ll come by around ten.”

“I’ll be ready. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Michael. We’ll keep our fingers crossed. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye.” I hung up then turned to Ostin. “We’re in.”

“Well done,” Ostin said. “You know, you could always just shock Clyde again.”

“The man helped kidnap my mother. Whatever it takes,” I said. “Whatever it takes.”

23. Clyde

I didn't sleep well that night.

I had a nightmare of my mother sitting in a cage at the zoo surrounded by laughing hyenas and calling for me to help her. Ostin woke me when he knocked on my door at seven. I answered the door still in my pajamas. He was dressed for school.

"What's up?" I asked groggily.

"Not you," he said. "My mom told me to come get you for breakfast."

I rubbed my eyes. "Okay. I'll be right there."

I went back to my room and put on my robe, then walked down the hall to the Lisses' and let myself in. Breakfast was on the table and Ostin and his father were already eating. Mrs. Liss had made wheat toast with a fried egg in the middle.

Mr. Liss was reading the paper and dipped it a little to look at me.

"Good morning, Michael."

"Good morning," I replied.

"That's your plate," Ostin said.

I sat down next to him.

At the sound of my voice, Mrs. Liss came out of the kitchen.

"Good morning, honey. How did you sleep?"

"Not very well."

"That's understandable. You just make yourself right at home."

I poured myself a glass of orange juice.

“There are hash browns too,” Ostin said, pushing a plate my way. “With cheddar.”

“Thanks.”

“Is there anything else you want?” Mrs. Liss asked. “Do you need some ketchup or Tabasco sauce for your egg?”

“No. I’m good,” I said.

Mr. Liss glanced at his watch and set down his paper. “I’ve got to go.” He stood, looking at us. “You boys take it easy.” Mr. Liss had an unusually deep voice that made everything he said sound like an order.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“See ya, Dad,” Ostin said.

Mr. Liss grabbed his jacket and keys from the counter, kissed Mrs. Liss, then walked out. When he was gone Mrs. Liss said, “I forgot the salt and pepper.” She walked back to the kitchen.

Ostin said in a hushed voice, “I wish I could go with you to the police station.”

“Me too.”

“Are you nervous to see him?”

“Yeah.” I took a drink of juice.

Mrs. Liss walked back in. “Here you go, darlin’.” She salt-and-peppered my egg for me even though I didn’t want it. “So, Michael, do you feel up to going to school today?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Lieutenant Lloyd is going to pick me up at ten. We’re going down to the station to talk to the man they put in jail.”

Her brow furrowed. “Oh? I didn’t know that. Would you like me to go with you?”

“No, I’ll be all right.”

“How are you on clothes? Do you need some laundry done?”

“I’m okay for now.” The truth was, I’d been wearing the same clothes for three days.

“Well, whatever you need, just ask. I’ll just be your mama until your mama gets back.”

“Thank you,” I said, grateful for how she’d said it.

Ostin finished eating then went and got his backpack. “School awaits.” I walked to the door with him. “Good luck,” he said. “Bones.”

“Bones,” I replied. We bumped fists and then he walked off down the hallway.

“Thank you for breakfast, Mrs. Liss.”

“You’re welcome. Please let me know when you get back from the police station.”

“Sure thing.” I went back to my apartment and showered and dressed. Then it was time to go outside to the parking lot to wait.

I was sitting on the curb when Lieutenant Lloyd pulled up in his police cruiser. He rolled down his window. “Good morning, Michael.”

The morning sun was just above the mountains and I shielded my eyes with both my hands. “Hi.”

“How are you?”

I shrugged. I know he was just being friendly but it was kind of a stupid question. “I’ve been better.”

He nodded sympathetically. “Come sit in the front seat.”

I climbed into the car, put on my seat belt, and we drove downtown.

The drive to the jail took about twenty minutes. I was ticking a lot. Lieutenant Lloyd didn’t say anything about it, but I’m pretty sure he noticed because he asked me again if I really wanted to do this. I guess taking a minor into the jail is pretty unusual, and he was probably having second thoughts about it. I told him I was positive it was the right thing.

When we arrived at the jail I went through all the security, metal detectors and all, then followed Lieutenant Lloyd down a long corridor passing other police officers on the way. At the end of the hall were two doors. He led me into the door on the left into a darkened room. “This is the observation room,” he explained. “This is where we watch what’s going on in the interrogation room.”

There was a large two-way mirror as well as two monitors mounted to a console. The gunman, Clyde, was sitting in a chair on the other side of the glass, his hands handcuffed behind his back.

Seeing him filled me with anger.

“This is Detective Muir,” Lieutenant Lloyd said, gesturing to a man sitting in front of the bank of monitors. He’ll be recording everything.”

I turned back. “You record what happens inside?”

“Every word,” he said.

I hadn’t thought about that. I wouldn’t be able to speak freely.

Lieutenant Lloyd looked into my eyes. “You’re still sure you want to do this?”

“I’m sure,” I said.

“You’re a brave young man,” he said. “Okay, then. We have Stuart in handcuffs, but if you feel threatened at all, let me know.” He patted his gun belt. “I have my Taser.”

Me too, I thought. “I’m ready.”

As we started to walk out I brushed by the recording console and pulsed. Suddenly all the screens in the room went blank.

“Wait,” Muir said. “We just went down.”

Lieutenant Lloyd groaned. “What timing.”

“It’s like we got a power surge or something,” Detective Muir said, flipping a few switches. He spent the next five minutes trying to get the system back up.

Finally Lieutenant Lloyd asked, “Does the phone still work?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll use the intercom on it. We won’t be able to tape it, but at least we’ll hear what’s going on.”

We walked back out to the hallway. Lieutenant Lloyd unlocked and opened the door. The interrogation room was rectangular with bare white cinder block walls. Clyde sat at the opposite end of a long, wooden table. He wore an orange jail jumpsuit with the name *stuart* and a number printed above the left breast.

“Hello, Clyde,” Lieutenant Lloyd said.

Stuart didn’t look at Lieutenant Lloyd, but glared at me.

“I’m sure you remember who this is.”

He said nothing.

“Let me help you. This is Michael Vey. He’s the son of the woman you helped kidnap.”

He scowled. “I know who he is.”

“Good. Because you owe him an explanation.”

Clyde turned his body sideways. “I don’t owe him nothin’.”

Lieutenant Lloyd shook his head. He whispered to me, “Like I said, he’s not cooperating.”

“Maybe if I talked to him alone.”

He thought about it for a moment then said, “I was afraid it might come to that.” He walked up to Clyde. “I’m leaving Michael alone with you. Don’t try anything crazy.”

Suddenly Clyde’s expression changed from anger to fear. “No! You can’t leave him alone with me. I have rights against cruel and inhumane punishment. I have rights!”

Lloyd looked at him. “I was saying, I’m leaving him alone with you. But I’m watching you carefully through the glass so don’t get any ideas . . .” Lieutenant Lloyd turned back to me and shook his head. “Be careful,” he whispered. “The man’s nutty as a bag of trail mix. Good luck.”

When the door shut, Clyde looked up at me and our eyes met.

“Where’s my mother?”

His lips pursed. I stood up and took a few steps toward him. I knew the police were listening so I chose my words carefully. “Do you need something to jog your memory?”

“You stay away from me, electric boy.”

“What did you call me?”

“I know all about your kind, you glowing freaks.”

“My kind?”

He scowled. “Yes, your kind.” For the first time I noticed the scars running up his arm. He followed my gaze, then looked back up at me. “Yeah, that’s from one of you. You Glows are all alike.”

“How many are there of us?”

“Too many. One of you is too many.”

“I only did what I did because you pulled a gun on my mother.

You made me do it.”

“They made me do it.”

“Who made you?”

He didn’t answer.

“You know, I can reach you from here,” I said, which wasn’t true but he didn’t know it.

He sneered at me then said, “Hatch.”

“What’s a hatch?”

“Hatch isn’t a *what*, you idiot. He’s a *who*.”

“Who is Hatch?”

He didn’t answer.

“Is Hatch the guy with the sunglasses?”

“They’re not sunglasses. It’s how he sees the Glows.” He said the word as if it were bitter on his tongue.

“What’s a . . . Glow?”

“You’re a Glow.”

“Who were those other two kids with him?”

“Glows. Zeus and Nichelle.”

“I saw what Zeus does. What does Nichelle do?”

“She’s Hatch’s protection against Glows.” His face bent in a dark grin. “Oh, you’re going to like her. Trust me. She’s the nastiest of the whole stinking, nasty bunch of you.”

“How long have they known about me?”

“Since you were a baby. They just couldn’t find you. You and the other.”

I guessed he was talking about Taylor. “Where is she?”

“You’ll have to ask Hatch.”

“Where did they take my mother?”

“How would I know that? They left me.”

“Where did they plan to take my mother?”

“You’ll never find her,” he said, and a dark smile crossed his face. “You have no idea what you’re up against, glow worm. They have private jets and hidden compounds. They’re all over the world. Your mother could be anywhere by now.”

“Where is Hatch?”

He looked away.

“Where is Hatch?” I said louder. I began rubbing the table. “Do you need some persuasion?”

“What are you going to do, kill me? You’d be doing me a favor.

They’re going to kill me anyway. You’ll see. To them we’re all expendable. Even the Glows.”

I decided to change my tactic. “If I can stop Hatch . . .”

He interrupted me with laughter. “You think you can stop Hatch? The U.S. Marine Corps couldn’t stop Hatch.”

“ . . . If I can stop Hatch, I’ll be able to prove that they forced you into this. Help me find my mother and I promise I’ll testify for you and get you out of here.”

Clyde’s laughter only increased. “You think I want to go out there with them? I’m safer in here.”

I leaned forward and whispered, “Is Hatch at the school in Pasadena?”

He looked down.

“Is Hatch at the school in Pasadena?” I repeated.

Without looking up, he said, “It’s not a school.”

“Is that where he is?”

He looked up. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

I looked at him for another moment, then over at the mirror. “I’m done,” I said.

When I turned back Clyde was smiling. “Hatch is waiting for you, you know. He’s been waiting a long, long time. He really wants you.”

Just then the door opened and Lieutenant Lloyd walked in. “All right, Clyde.”

“You know who this kid is, don’t you?” Clyde shouted. “He’s a Glow. He can shock you worse than that Taser you’re wearing. He can kill you. He can kill all of us. They’re going to take over.”

I looked up at Lloyd and shrugged.

“Shut up,” Lieutenant Lloyd said.

“They’re going to take over the entire world!”

“Save it for the judge,” Lieutenant Lloyd said.

As I walked out of the room Lieutenant Lloyd put his arm on my shoulder. “Sorry, kid. That’s what I was afraid of. Ever since we brought him in he’s been ranting about hatches and glow worms.” He shook his head. “The man’s insane.”

24. Jack

Ostin came to my apartment directly from school. I was on my knees filling my backpack with clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Packing. They’re in Pasadena.”

“Clyde told you that?”

“Sort of. The man in the sunglasses is named Hatch.”

“Hatch?”

“And you were right. There are more of us electric children.”

“Did the police hear all that?”

“Yeah. But they just think Clyde’s crazy.”

Ostin sat on my bed. “So now what?”

“I’m going to Pasadena.”

“How do we do that?”

“What do you mean, ‘we’?” I said.

“You can’t go alone. What if you need help?”

“This isn’t a video game, Ostin. It’s real danger. If something goes wrong we can’t just push a reset button.”

“Which is precisely why I need to go. What good is being here without my best friend?”

I looked at him. “Thanks.”

“So how do we get there?”

“Jack.”

Ostin’s eyes widened. “Jack the bully?”

“Yeah, he’s perfect. He’s got his own car.”

“There’s no way my mom will let me go with him driving.”

“Your mom can’t know.”

“You’re right. She’d freak no matter what.” He looked down.

“What makes you think Jack will drive us?”

“He owes me.” I rubbed my hands together and they made the crackling sound of electricity. “I think I can persuade him.”

25. Tara

Taylor was sitting on her bed eating supper when she heard her door unlock. A voice from a speaker said, “Enter.”

The door opened and Tara walked into the room. She was smiling. “You finally got some food, huh?”

Taylor looked up. In spite of her mistrust of the place, she felt a natural kinship to Tara. “Yeah. What’s with all the bananas?”

“High in potassium. It’s good for us.” She shook her head and her smile grew. “Crazy, huh? You must feel like you fell down the rabbit hole.”

“The rabbit hole?”

“You know, *Alice in Wonderland*. But really, it’s not as bad as you think.”

“I’ve been kidnapped, tied up, tortured by some deranged Goth chick, and locked in a cell and you say it’s not so bad?”

“You’re right, Nichelle’s pretty awful, isn’t she?” She swayed a

little. “As far as the cell, it’s just temporary. It’s just until you see that they mean you no harm. They have a lot of experience with this.”

“Kidnapping?” Taylor asked.

Tara shook her head. “Look, sis, I understand why you’re so upset. I really do.” She walked over and sat on the bed next to her. “And I’m sorry if I don’t seem more sympathetic, but I’m just so happy you’re here. My own sister. I’ve waited for this day for so long.”

“How long have you known you’re a twin?” Taylor asked.

“Nine years—since Dr. Hatch found me. He promised me that someday he’d find you. And he did.”

“I didn’t even know I had a sister.”

“It’s kind of cool, isn’t it?”

Taylor pushed away her tray. “I’m sorry, I’m just scared and I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“I really do understand,” she said. “But it will be okay. Trust me. They just want to know why we’re so different. The research they do here will save millions of lives someday. And they take really good care of us. Really good care. We even have our own concierge service.”

“What’s that?”

“You know, like at fancy hotels. You can ask for pretty much anything and they’ll get it for you. Clothes, front-row concert tickets and backstage passes, gadgets: almost anything, within reason. I mean, if you asked for a jet they’d probably say no. But I asked for a diamond bracelet once and they got me one.”

“Why would they do all that?”

“Because we’re the special ones. Out of billions of people in this world there’s only seventeen of us. Well, actually, thirteen of us now.”

Taylor wondered what she had meant by that.

“We’re like royalty. Try it. Just ask for anything.”

“Okay. I want to go home.”

Tara sighed. “Except that. Taylor, give it a couple weeks. If you are still so unhappy then I’m sure they’ll let you go.”

Taylor looked at her with surprise. “Really?”

“Of course. I don’t have a lock on my door. I come and go as I wish. The thing is, they have to protect themselves too. They have a lot of money

invested in all this and they're working with kids. It's a big risk. Does that make sense?"

Taylor looked down for a moment. "Yeah, I guess it does. But then why did they kidnap me?"

"They didn't want to. They invited you to come to the Elgen Academy, didn't they? And everything they promised was true, the best schooling, and the college of your choice. In fact, when you turn sixteen you can have any car you want. A Ferrari, a Rolls-Royce, Maserati, anything. But your adopted parents wouldn't let you go, would they?"

"No."

"They don't even know about your powers, do they?"

"No."

"Exactly. They have no idea how special you are."

"How do you know all this?"

"Because you're my sister." Her eyes moistened with emotion. "I've waited a long, long time for you."

Taylor felt a little better. "So, are you . . . electric?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"What can you do?"

"Well, we're twins, so my powers are like yours, but a little more refined. I've had years to practice them here." She sat back on the bed. "Okay, want to see something?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Here goes." Tara closed her eyes.

Suddenly, Taylor felt a warm rush of happiness flow through her.

Taylor laughed. “How did you do that?”

“Cool, isn’t it? I’ve learned to stimulate the part of the brain that produces serotonin—kind of a happy drug. I can also do the opposite, but you don’t want to feel that.”

“What do you mean the opposite?”

“I can make you feel the negative emotions. Like rage or incredible fear.”

“How much fear?”

“Black-widows-crawling-all-over-your-body fear.”

Taylor bristled.

“Like I said, you don’t want to feel that.”

Taylor shook her head. “No, I’ll pass on that.”

“You’ll learn too. Part of our education at the academy is working with scientists to develop our powers. They have also found that eating certain things enhances our abilities.”

“Like bananas?” Taylor asked.

“Yeah. You can have all the banana shakes you want. Banana cream pie, banana smoothies, the list goes on. Also minerals help. We take special supplements three times a day. Supplements made especially for us. They also avoid refined sugar. It gets in the way of things.

Once I gave up soda pop for a month and I doubled my stretch.”

“Stretch?”

“That’s some of the jargon they use here. You’ll learn it. Stretch is how far you can push your powers. One boy here has such a powerful stretch he can reach airplanes.”

”What does he do to airplanes?” Taylor asked.

Tara shook her head. “Nothing,” she said.

“So can you read minds?” Taylor asked.

Tara’s expression fell. “No. Can you read minds?”

Her reaction worried Taylor. “Uh, no. I mean, I just thought with what you can do, you might be able to.”

“No. None of us can read minds. I think they’d freak out if someone could. I mean, if they could, just imagine what they could do.”

Taylor nodded. “What about Nichelle?”

She grimaced. “No one here likes Nichelle. She’s a beast. Just stay close to Dr. Hatch and she’ll keep her distance. She used her power on me once and Dr. Hatch disciplined her.”

“Why didn’t you just do something to her?”

“Our powers don’t work on her. She’s like a vampire. She sucks our power.”

“That’s what she told me.”

“Yeah, she thinks it’s cool. She’s such a loser. The thing is, around us she’s powerful but in the outer world she’s nothing. Like Kryptonite can kill Superman, but you and I could wear it for jewelry. In the outer world she’s just another Goth. Anyway, it’s against the rules to use our powers without Dr. Hatch’s permission. And we’re never allowed to use our powers on each other. Just the GPs.”

“What’s a GP?”

“You’ll find out.”

“What time is it anyway?”

“It’s around ten. Bedtime. So you better get some good rest. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

“Doing what?”

She stood. “I don’t want to ruin the surprise, but trust me, you’re gonna love it.” She leaned forward and kissed Taylor on the forehead.

“Sleep tight, don’t let the bedbugs bite.” She walked out and the door clicked locked behind her.

Taylor lay back on her bed and looked up at the camera’s blinking red light. *Wasn’t worried about the bedbugs, she thought.*

26. Harry Winston

Taylor only knew it was morning because a nasal voice over the room's speaker told her it was time to wake up. She was still lying in bed when the lock clicked and Tara walked in. Her arms were full of clothing. "Get up, sleepyhead."

Taylor sat up rubbing her eyes. "I didn't sleep much last night."

"Well, you'll have to nap later, because right now we have a lot of fun to get to."

She laid the pile of clothes at the foot of Taylor's bed. "Fortunately we wear the same size in everything so you can borrow my things for now."

Taylor looked down at her smock. "You mean I don't have to wear this thing?"

Tara stared at her. "You're kidding me, right?"

Taylor shrugged. "I don't know."

"Wow, you've got this place all wrong. This isn't a prison. That's just an examination smock. We all wore them the first day they were establishing baselines. But that was yesterday. Today's your lucky day. Dr. Hatch said to take you shopping for a new wardrobe. And guess where?"

Taylor shrugged.

"The Miracle Mile . . ."

"Huh?"

"Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills. Heard of it? If you're anything like me—and you are—you are going to have the time of your life."

"I don't have any money," Taylor said.

Tara laughed. “You don’t need money here. Now get dressed.”

Taylor looked through the clothes Tara had brought. None of them looked as if they’d even been worn. “Wow. These are some expensive brands.” She picked up a pair of jeans.

“You can keep whatever you like, I’ll just get more. Actually, you’ll get whatever you need today.” Tara held up a blouse. “I love this one, it looks great with my . . . our complexion. Do you like it?”

“Yeah.”

“Try it on.”

Ignoring the video cameras, Taylor slipped off the smock and put on the blouse.

“You look ridiculously beautiful,” Tara said. “You’re the most beautiful girl in this place.” She laughed. “Oh, that’s kind of like com-plimenting myself, isn’t it?”

Taylor grinned. “Yeah, it is.”

After Taylor was dressed, the two girls walked outside the cell to an elevator. Tara put her finger on a fingerprint sensor pad. The screen turned green and the elevator door slid open.

“We’ll stop by the cafeteria and get some breakfast on the way out,” Tara said. She pushed the button for floor one and they descended two levels to the main floor. “This way to the cafeteria,” she said.

The cafeteria looked less like a school cafeteria than a restaurant in a fancy hotel. They were met at the door by the restaurant’s maître d’, a short, Italian man with silver hair and a black tuxedo.

“Good morning, ladies. You both look bellissima.”

“Yes we do,” Tara said. “Thank you for noticing.”

“Thank you,” Taylor said.

“What will it be today? Crab Benedict and banana-and-candied-walnut oatmeal are today’s chef specials.”

“I just want a banana smoothie,” Tara said. “We’re in a hurry.”

“I guess, me too,” Taylor said.

“Will you be having that to go, then?”

“Yes,” Tara said. “And fast.”

“Yes, very well.” He ran back through the kitchen doors and just a few minutes later a waiter brought out their smoothies in crystal goblets with small, silver spoons. Tara took both glasses and handed one to Taylor. “Let’s go, sis. We’re burning daylight.”

“Where are we going?”

“I already told you. Shopping.”

“Outside?”

“Well, duh?”

Taylor looked around. “No one is going to stop me from leaving?”

“Why would they do that?”

“Dr. Hatch said—”

“Oh,” Tara interrupted. “That reminds me. Dr. Hatch is going to meet up with us a little later. He said he has a surprise for you.” Her eyebrows rose. “So get excited. His surprises are epic. He doesn’t do things small.”

Taylor followed her out the front door. It was the first time Taylor had seen the sun for several days. Her instinct told her to bolt, but she was still

surrounded by fences and Tara's happiness and reassurances had calmed her some. A Rolls-Royce Phantom was waiting for them at the curb. The driver stood at the back door, holding it open for them. "Good morning ladies."

"Morning, Griff," Tara said.

"Good morning," Taylor said.

"Welcome to the academy, Taylor," the driver said. "My name is Griffin. If I can do anything to make your day more pleasant please let me know."

Taylor wondered how he knew her name. The two girls climbed into the backseat. Taylor had never been in such a luxurious car. The interior was all leather, glass, and highly polished burl wood. A glass partition separated them from the driver. In the center console was a telephone. Taylor's heart jumped. "Can I call my parents?"

Tara shook her head. "We'll have to ask Dr. Hatch. But it's probably too soon. There's still too much of that still in you."

"Too much of what?" Taylor asked.

Tara pointed to the world outside the compound. "That."

The drive from Pasadena to the palm-tree-lined streets of Beverly Hills was only twenty-five minutes. It was a bright day and the sidewalks were crowded with both the glamorous and those seeking it.

Griffin parked the Rolls in a reserved spot on South Santa Monica Boulevard, then followed a few yards behind the girls as they shopped.

"Why is he following us?" Taylor asked suspiciously.

"Duh," Tara said. "Someone's got to carry our bags."

Rodeo Drive started at the Beverly Hills Hotel and stretched on for nearly a mile. Tara explained that the district took up three city blocks and had over

a hundred boutiques, hotels, and salons. Every fashion designer worth visiting had a residence in the neighborhood.

In the first block they passed stores Taylor had only heard of: Lacoste, Juicy Couture, Chanel, Hugo Boss, and Giorgio Armani.

Tara pulled Taylor toward Juicy Couture, a tall glass store with a window display of mannequins in jewel-studded tracksuits with purses, patterned with Couture's trademark crowns, slung over their shoulders. Tara wanted to look at the swimsuits and pulled a floral print tankini from the rack.

"What do you think of this?"

Taylor looked at the price tag. "Two hundred and thirty dollars for a bathing suit?"

Tara shrugged. "I know. A bargain, right?"

They crossed Brighton Way and continued down Rodeo Drive.

Tara pulled Taylor into Salvatore Ferragamo. At Tara's insistence, Taylor selected a pair of sunglasses in red and Tara got the same ones in purple.

Outside a store called Dolce & Gabbana, Tara squealed, "They have their new collection in! Come on!"

A woman standing near the front of the store smiled as the girls entered. "There are two of you! Which one of you lovely ladies is Tara?"

"I'm Tara," Tara said, curtsying. "This is my twin, Taylor."

"Twice the charm. It's such a pleasure meeting you, Taylor. How may we serve you ladies?"

"We're here to dress Taylor up," Tara said.

"Our pleasure." The woman snapped her fingers in the air. "Marc, bring Tara and Taylor some sparkling water." She turned back to the girls, smiling

unctuously. “This way, please.”

Taylor whispered to Tara, “She knows you?”

“Of course. I’m one of her best customers.”

The woman led them to dressing rooms where her staff delivered outfit after outfit of gorgeous fabrics and light dresses. They spent more than five thousand dollars and the salesladies waved happily to them as they walked out, the girls’ arms heavy with shopping bags, which they surrendered to Griffin.

Taylor trailed behind Tara all morning as they walked through Tara’s favorite stores: Bebe, Gucci, Chanel. Even though they were the identical age, Taylor thought Tara acted more like a twenty-one-year-old than a fifteen-year-old. She knew her way around the stores and if they didn’t already know her, all she had to do was say that she was with the Elgen Academy and the employees tripped over each other to help them.

At Tara’s urging, Taylor purchased nine pairs of jeans, six skirts, four pairs of shoes, eight shirts, two leather jackets, and three bags of accessories. Just for fun, Tara picked out three identical outfits.

Taylor was nervous about all the money they were spending. She had once used her mother’s credit card to download an album, without asking, and she’d been grounded for a week. “Whose credit card are we using?” Taylor asked.

Tara held it up. “American Express Black card. It’s mine. I just have to ask first. But they’ve never turned me down. I think it has like a two-hundred-thousand-dollar limit.”

Taylor’s jaw dropped. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Nope. Far cry from Preston Street, eh?”

Taylor looked at her. “How do you know where I live?”

“I asked, of course.” Tara smiled. “Sis, you just don’t understand how excited I’ve been to have you here. You coming *home* is the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me.”

The way Tara said “home” scared her. Taylor wasn’t sure how to respond to Tara’s excitement. Finally she just said, “Thank you.”

A few minutes later Taylor was looking at a diamond necklace displayed in the window of Tiffany & Company when Tara said, “Dr. Hatch said to not buy any jewelry.”

“I was just looking.”

“No problem,” she said. “He’ll be here soon anyway. He wanted to meet us around one. Which is”—she looked at her watch—“almost a half hour from now. Are you ready for a break?”

Taylor nodded.

“Good. Because I want to show you something.” Tara led her to Via Rodeo, where they wandered through the cobblestone roads, pausing at the fountains and wrought-iron lamps and arches. Griffin still followed, but at a distance.

“This is so beautiful,” Taylor said.

“It’s European,” Tara explained. “Have you ever seen the real thing? Europe?”

“No. Someday.” Taylor’s parents had promised to take her on a tour of Europe the summer after she graduated from high school.

Something that even with her mother’s professional discounts, they’d still have to save and sacrifice for. Thinking of her parents made her heart ache.

Tara touched her shoulder. “No? You will. You are going to love our vacations.” They walked past a crowd of tourists posing in front of a

fountain and crossed the street toward the Beverly Wilshire.

“Are you having fun?”

Taylor nodded, even though she was still afraid.

“Told you you’d like it. Only one thing I’m disappointed about. I usually see celebrities. I guess you can’t have everything.” Before Taylor could say anything Tara asked, “Are you hungry yet?”

Taylor figured they had spent more than ten thousand dollars on clothes. “Are you sure we’re not going to get in trouble for spending so much?”

“We might get in trouble for not spending enough. This is what we’re supposed to do.”

“I just can’t believe this,” Taylor said, feeling confused.

“Believe it. It’s the way it is all the time. Dr. Hatch always says special people should have special things.” Her face lit. “You like sushi, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never had it. But I’ve always wanted to try it.”

“I’ve got a place for you.”

They walked a couple of blocks to a Japanese restaurant. Urasawa.

The restaurant’s lobby was crowded and Tara pushed her way to the hostess counter, which embarrassed Taylor immensely.

“A table for three,” Tara said.

The hostess, a middle-aged Japanese woman, looked at her dully.

“Do you have reservations?”

“No,” Tara said confidently. “We’re with the Elgen Academy.”

The woman slightly bowed. “My apologies; *gomen nasai*. Right this way.” She whispered into a nearby waitress’s ear, then grabbed the menus and immediately led Tara and Taylor to a table near the back of the restaurant. “We reserve this table for celebrities,” the woman said. “Welcome to Urasawa.”

As they sat down a kimono-clad waitress brought out a plate of *gyoza*.

“This is amazing,” Taylor said. “I can’t believe they just let us in.”

Tara looked at the menu. “Of course they did.”

Taylor looked at the empty seat. “Is Griffin going to eat with us?”

Tara crinkled her nose. “No. Why would he do that?”

“Then who’s the third seat for?”

“Hopefully, that seat would be for me,” Dr. Hatch said. He was standing next to the table, dressed casually in light slacks and a polo shirt.

Tara smiled. “Hello, Dr. Hatch.”

Taylor bristled at the sight of him, but faked a smile.

“May I join you?” he asked.

“Of course,” Tara said.

He pulled out a chair and sat down. “So how goes the shopping? Having fun?”

“We’ve spent about ten thousand dollars so far,” Tara said.

“Only ten?” Hatch said. “Come on, girls, you need to pick up the pace. Shop like you mean it.”

Taylor looked at him in wonderment. Dr. Hatch lifted a pair of chopsticks and helped himself to one of the dumplings. “Hmm,” he said. “Fabulous.”

The waitress returned with a large platter of sushi, tempura, and *yakiniku*. The waitress bowed to Dr. Hatch. “Dr. Hatch, *youkoso*.”

“*Domo arigato gozaimasu*.”

Tara and Dr. Hatch attacked the food while Taylor fumbled with her chopsticks.

“This is great sushi,” Tara said. “Not as good as that place we ate in Tokyo last summer . . . But it’s still good.”

“Kyubei,” Hatch said. “Wonderful restaurant. One of the few places that still serves puffer fish.”

“You went to Tokyo?” Taylor asked.

“Oh, yeah. We go everywhere. Last year the family went on a trip to Japan, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.”

“I’ve always wanted to travel,” Taylor said.

Dr. Hatch handed Taylor a fork. “Chopsticks can be such a bother. Please, enjoy. The *unagi* is especially delicious.”

Taylor speared a piece. “What’s this?”

“Eel,” Tara said. “It’s my favorite.”

Taylor took a tiny bite while Tara and Hatch watched her expectantly. “What do you think?” Hatch asked.

“It looks gross, but it’s pretty good.”

Hatch smiled. “Things aren’t always what they seem,” he said.

Taylor sensed he wasn’t talking about food.

“Bet you didn’t have sushi this good in Idaho,” Tara said.

“I didn’t have it at all. Sushi’s kind of expensive.”

“That’s too bad,” Tara said.

“It’s not a big deal,” Taylor said defensively. “It’s just food.”

“Taylor’s right,” Hatch said. “It is just food. And besides, want is a thing of the past.” He smiled at her. “From now on you’re going to experience things you’ve only dreamed of. And you’re going to travel to places you’ve only imagined: Bali, Nepal, Moscow, Paris, Rome. And that’s just the beginning. We have a student traveling right now from London to Dubai. It’s a brave new world, Taylor. A brave new world with endless opportunities.” He gestured with his chopsticks. “Think of it. Every day billions of people wake up to lives of desperation—some just hoping to survive another miserable day. Those few with enough to eat, are hoping their lives might mean something—hoping their dreams and existence won’t just blow away with the sands of time. But not you. Not anymore. What we do at the academy, what you do as one of the chosen, will endure. Someday people will read textbooks about you. You will be talked about and discussed just like the early pioneers and explorers in today’s textbooks. You are Christopher Columbus, Marco Polo, and Neil Armstrong, all in one.”

“Why would they talk about me?” Taylor asked.

“Because you are a pioneer in a very real sense. You are the prototype of the next great species. You will be more famous than you can possibly imagine.”

Taylor didn’t know what to say.

After another half hour Hatch said, “Are you girls almost done eating? Because I have a surprise for Taylor.”

Tara smiled. “Lucky girl. Dr. Hatch has the best surprises.”

“Are you ready?” Hatch asked.

“I guess so,” Taylor said.

Hatch stood and raised his hand. The waitress rushed over. “*Hai*, sir.”

“Put it on our tab, thirty percent tip.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

They walked out of the restaurant. A black Cadillac Escalade with tinted windows was idling out front. Two black-suited men with ear radios and aviator sunglasses stood next to the car. Hatch waved to them. “We’re just going to walk. It’s only a few blocks from here.”

“What’s a few blocks?” Taylor asked.

“Have you ever heard of Harry Winston?” Hatch asked.

“Harry Winston the jeweler?”

“Exactly,” he said, looking impressed. “How do you know Harry Winston?”

“It’s in that song, ‘Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend.’ They say, ‘talk to me Harry Winston.’”

Dr. Hatch laughed. “Brava! Very good, Taylor. You’re much too young to know that though.”

“My mom liked that song. I mean, likes that song.” It bothered her that she had used the past tense.

Hatch nodded. “Did you know that Harry Winston acquired and gave away the most famous diamond in history? It’s called the Hope diamond and it’s more than forty-five carats. Today it’s on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. What’s most impressive to me is that not only did he acquire a gem once owned by King Louis the XIV, but he also had the guts to cut it. He had the courage to improve it. That’s how you make history. You cut against the rough.” He looked up. “And here we are,” he said, raising his hands.

The store was composed of smooth gray stone. A simple brass sign out front read hW, and below that, Harry Winston.

A man opened the door for them. “Hello, Dr. Hatch.”

Hatch waved the girls ahead. “Girls. After you.”

Taylor had never been in such a luxurious place before. The floors were carpeted in rich chocolate hues and the walls were a dark mahogany. It was cool inside and windowless, the room lit by large wall lamps. The atmosphere was hushed, as if they’d entered a museum or library.

“This is the place to buy jewelry. This is where the stars come when they’re up for an Oscar,” Tara said.

“And you,” Hatch said to Taylor, “are a star.”

An older gentleman with silver hair whisked across the room to greet them. “Ah, Dr. Hatch,” he said with a French accent. “It’s so good to see you again. I have the necklaces you requested right over here.”

“Thank you. Tara, I’m going to spend a little time with Taylor. Why don’t you find yourself some earrings.”

“Yes, sir.”

“This way, Taylor,” Hatch said.

The jeweler led them to a small private room. In the center of the room there was a round polished marble desk with a mirror and a magnifying glass. “Shall I bring in a preliminary selection?”

“Please,” Hatch said, matching the Frenchman’s formal tone and winking at Taylor. The man nodded and left the room.

He returned a moment later carrying three boxes, which he laid reverently in front of Taylor, lifting the lids off one by one. “I would like to show you a sampling from our classic selection. First, the Loop Necklace.” He held it out for her to examine. “This elegant piece is made up from three hundred and fifty-eight round diamonds. It is immaculate.”

“It’s beautiful,” Taylor said.

“Would you like to see it on?” Hatch asked.

“Really? Sure.” Taylor held her hair off her neck while the jeweler placed the necklace on her. He fastened the necklace, then slid a small oval mirror across the table toward her so she could look at herself.

The necklace felt heavy and cool. Each diamond glistened like it was on show.

“Wow . . .” She touched the necklace. She couldn’t believe she was wearing it.

“Show her the next one,” Hatch said.

“The next one?” Taylor asked.

The man nodded as he unclasped the necklace Taylor was wearing. “Certainly. The Baby Wreath Necklace consists of one hundred seventeen round and marquise-cut diamonds for a total of twenty-five carats. The pendant is set in platinum.” The necklace was shorter and thicker, the diamonds set in an intricate pattern of holly-shaped links.

“Do you like it?” Hatch asked.

“It’s cool,” Taylor said.

“And the one I’ve saved for last. Nightlife. Made up of sixty round and pear-shaped diamonds for a total of thirteen carats within a platinum setting.”

Taylor gasped when she saw it. The brilliant diamonds hung from a delicate-looking platinum chain, the different diamond cuts alternating in a stunning pattern.

Hatch turned to Taylor. “Anything stand out?”

Taylor smiled in spite of herself. “This one. Definitely.” She touched the necklace delicately.

The jeweler nodded approvingly. “A beautiful piece,” he said.

“We’d like to try it on please,” Hatch said.

The man lifted the necklace out of its case and handed it to Hatch. Hatch put it around Taylor’s neck. The white diamonds glistened against her tan skin like they were alive. Taylor had never seen anything so beautiful in her life. She wondered what her friends would think if they saw her now. But rather than joy, the thought brought her sadness. She missed her friends and she felt guilty for enjoying herself.

“What do you think?” Hatch asked.

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“How much is this trinket?” he asked.

“Just a minute, sir.” He turned over the tag. “That piece is one hundred sixty-eight.”

“One hundred and sixty-eight dollars?” Taylor asked.

The jeweler almost choked.

“No,” Hatch said. “One hundred sixty-eight *thousand* dollars.”

Taylor suddenly felt very uncomfortable. “That’s like wearing a house.”

“Fortunately not quite as heavy,” Hatch said smiling. “But do you like it?”

“It’s incredible.”

“Good. Then it’s yours.”

She looked up at him in amazement. “What?”

“It’s our welcome-home gift to you.”

Taylor was speechless. “You’re kidding.”

Hatch put his hand on her arm, touching her bare skin. “I would never kid about something as important as that. We are so glad you’ve come home.”

As he spoke his thoughts coursed through Taylor’s mind. A chill rose up her spine and the depth of the darkness filled her with such terror she was suddenly nauseous. Taylor shuddered and pulled away.

Hatch looked at her curiously. “Are you okay?”

Taylor swallowed. “Sorry. I guess I’m not used to sushi.”

He nodded. “Of course. It’s an acquired taste.”

“Would you like the necklace wrapped up or will you be wearing it out?” the jeweler asked.

Hatch looked at Taylor. “Taylor?”

Taylor unfastened the necklace. “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, sir. But you’ve already done enough. I’m really not used to all this.”

“I understand.” He turned to the man and handed back the necklace. “Put this on hold. The young lady would like to think about it.”

“Very well, sir,” he said, disappointment evident in his voice. He returned the jewelry to the display case.

“Can we just go back?” Taylor asked.

“Absolutely. You came in the Rolls?”

“Yes,” Taylor said.

Hatch took out his phone and pushed a button on it. “Pick us up outside Harry Winston.” He slid the phone back in his pocket. “Come on, Tara.”

Tara took off the pearl earrings she was trying on and said to the woman helping her, “Sorry. Out of time.”

The three of them walked outside, where the Rolls was waiting for them. The black Escalade was parked behind it. Griffin opened the door and Taylor climbed in first. Hatch sat down next to her. Tara sat in the front next to the driver.

Hatch said, “You know, Taylor, everyone in the family is very excited to meet you.”

Taylor swallowed. Then she forced out, “I’m looking forward to meeting them as well.”

“I hoped you’d say that, because I’ve asked the chef to prepare a special dinner in your honor—a personal favorite of mine, beef Wellington. I hope your stomach is a little more agreeable with that than the sushi.”

“I was raised on casseroles and pizza. I’m afraid I’m just kind of an average girl.”

Hatch frowned. “No, Taylor. You’re anything but average.” His expression lightened. “But don’t worry, we’re not all china and crystal, we eat pizza

and hamburgers too. However, tonight is a very special occasion and requires a special cuisine.” He leaned back and smiled.

“The prodigal daughter has returned.”

27. Hitching a Ride

Jack lived about twelve blocks from my home, in an even poorer neighborhood than the one my mother and I lived in. I found his address in the school directory, then, after school let out, I went to see him.

Jack's house was at the end of a short, dead-end road called Leslie Street: an aged box of a home with chipped aluminum siding and faded cloth awnings. The front window had been broken and was covered with cardboard that was kept in place with duct tape. The yard was overgrown with weeds and pyracantha bushes. There were at least six cars at the house; some of them parked on the grass or on the road in front, most with flat tires and rusted bodies. Only one or two of them looked like they might actually run.

I climbed three steps to the AstroTurf-covered porch. The door-bell had yellowed masking tape over it with the word BROKE written in marker. I opened the rusted screen door and knocked on the wood door behind it. A minute or so later Jack answered. He was wearing a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, exposing his muscular arms and shoulders, as well as his tattoo. I forced myself not to blink. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I need to talk to you."

"I'm listening."

The TV was blaring behind him and I wondered if someone else was inside. "Not here. I need to talk to you someplace more private."

"Why?"

"I just do."

He looked at me for a moment, then stepped out on the front porch, shutting the door behind him. "Go ahead. My old man can't hear you."

“I need a ride.”

“You think I’m your chauffeur now?”

“To Pasadena.”

His face looked even more distressed. “Isn’t that, like, in California?”

“Yeah.”

“Man, what is this, a shakedown? I went to Dallstrom like you said. I’m not going to let you keep bullying me. I’ll go to the teachers and tell them what you did.”

“Calm down,” I said. “I’m not here to bully you. You’re the only one I can go to with this.”

“Why not your old man?”

“I don’t have a father.”

“Then your mother?”

“Don’t you watch the news?”

“No.”

“My mother was kidnapped. I’m pretty sure she’s in Pasadena. That’s why I need a ride there.”

“Why don’t you call the police?”

“It’s complicated. They can’t help.”

“Dude, I’m not driving all the way to California.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a wad of bills I had taken from mom’s secret stash. “Look, I’ve got money. I’ll pay you three hundred

dollars. It's all I've got."

He eyed the money. I could tell he was wavering. "Where'd you get that kind of dough?"

"It's my mom's emergency stash."

"Three hundred bucks, huh? When do you need to go?"

"As soon as possible."

"Just us?"

"And my friend Ostin."

"What if I bring someone? To help drive."

"Who?"

"Wade."

I hated Wade even more than Mitchell, but if it got me to California sooner, I'd deal with it. "Okay."

"What do we do after we're there?"

"You drop us off and you're done. That's it."

"No ride back?"

"No. I don't know how long we'll be."

Jack looked over at his car, a restored 1980 Chevy Camaro with a navy blue body and yellow racing stripe. "And you want to leave today, huh?"

"As soon as possible. I just need to get some things from my house. And pick up Ostin."

He scratched his stomach, then slowly exhaled. “Okay. I’ll call Wade. Where do you live?”

“Not far. Over by the 7-Eleven off Thirteenth East. We’ll meet you in the 7-Eleven parking lot in an hour. Deal?” I reached out my hand but he just looked at it fearfully.

“I’m not going to shock you.”

He took my hand and we shook. “Deal.”

I walked back to the apartment and knocked on Ostin’s door. “We leave in an hour.”

He looked at me as if I’d spoken in Chinese. “Leave? Where?”

“California. Didn’t you think I was serious?”

“With Jack?”

I nodded. “Yeah.” I purposely didn’t say anything about Wade.

Ostin looked anxious enough without being thrown in the car with his archenemy.

He looked back over his shoulder. “Man, my mom’s going to be so chapped at me. She’s going to ground me until I’m fifty.”

“Ground you from what?” I asked. “Homework or clogging?” We both knew that Ostin pretty much spent all his time in his room anyway.

“From hanging out with you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Well I wish my mom was around to ground me.” I slid my hands in my pockets. “Like I said, you don’t have to go.”

Ostin frowned. “Let me get a few things. I’ll be right there.”

About ten minutes later Ostin knocked on my apartment door then let himself in. He had a backpack that was mostly filled with junk food like potato chips and cheese puffs.

“What did you tell your mom?”

“I told her I was going to hang out with you.”

“She’s going to be worried out of her skull,” I said. “She’ll probably call the police.”

“I thought of that. I taped a note to your door. It says I went to Comic-Con with you and my uncle.”

“Will she believe that?”

“I don’t know, but that’s where my uncle is this week. He’s hardcore, and he never takes his cell phone, so my mom can’t check.”

“Brilliant,” I said. I picked up my bag. “Ready?”

“Let’s do this.”

I looked out to make sure no one was watching, then I locked our apartment door and we walked down the hall and out the building.

The 7-Eleven was only fifty yards from my home. Jack wasn’t there yet so we went inside and got cherry cola Slurpees and sat on the curb to wait.

“What if he doesn’t come?” Ostin asked.

“He’ll come. Besides, I’m paying him three hundred dollars.”

“Where did you get three hundred dollars?”

“My mom’s emergency fund.” I rubbed one foot with the other. “If there ever was an emergency this is it.”

About fifteen minutes later Jack's Camaro pulled into the parking lot and up to the gas pumps.

"There he is," I said.

Ostin squinted. "Who's that in the car with him?"

"Wade."

Ostin's eyes widened. "You didn't tell me Wade was coming."

"Sorry. It was part of the deal."

"I hate Wade."

"It's no big deal."

"You don't understand. I really, really hate Wade. Like, if he were in a shark tank and reached up to me for help I'd throw chum in the water."

Ostin has a great imagination.

"Look," I said, "we don't have a lot of options. Wade can help drive. Besides, he's not going to do anything to you. He's afraid of me."

Ostin just shook his head. "This just keeps getting worse."

Jack and Wade both climbed out of the car. Jack walked up to me. "I need money for gas."

I took the roll of bills out of my pocket and counted out a hundred and fifty. "Here. Half now, half when we get there."

He stuck his jaw out a little. "Fair enough."

Wade looked at Ostin and smiled. "Hey, I know you. I didn't recognize you with your pants on."

“Stay away from me.”

“Relax,” Wade said. “That was before I found out your friend’s a Taser.” He smiled and went inside the store. Ostin and I carried our packs over to the car. Jack opened the trunk and we put our things inside. Jack finished filling the car with gas about the time Wade came back out. He had pork rinds, mini-doughnuts, beef jerky, and a six-pack of Red Bull. “Let’s go, boys.”

“Sit in back,” Jack said to Wade.

“What?”

“I want to talk to Michael.”

“But . . .”

“Back, now.”

Wade scowled, threw Jack the bag of jerky, and climbed in the backseat. Ostin stared at me with the look of a man climbing into a snake pit, but he got in anyway.

I shut my door and Jack fired up the Camaro. I think he’d taken off the muffler to make it louder, because it roared like a jet. He looked over at me and smiled wryly. “California, here we come.”

28. Road trip

A few minutes after we were on the highway, Jack turned to me, offering an open bag of beef jerky.

“Here, help yourself.”

I took a piece. “Thanks.”

He set the bag to his side. “If you want more it’s right here.” He rubbed his chin. “So how long have you been shocking people?”

After all the years I’d spent hiding my power, it was strange talking so openly about it. “Since I was a kid,” I said. “Like two or three.”

“Do you know how much it hurts?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I’ve never been shocked.”

From the backseat came Ostin’s first words since he’d climbed into the car. “You’ve never been shocked?”

“I don’t think I can be,” I said.

“So, you could like grab a power line and it wouldn’t hurt you?”

Wade asked.

“I don’t know. But when I was four I chewed through the vacuum cleaner’s power cord and it shorted out in my mouth. I just remember it tickled a little and afterwards I felt really good.”

“Wait,” Ostin said. “You mean it’s possible that electricity makes you stronger?”

“Like I said, I don’t know. I’ve never tested it.”

“You could, like, eat batteries,” Wade said.

“No,” I said. “They’d break my teeth.”

Ostin looked happy again as he finally had something to think about besides Wade. “We need to test this,” he said. “I’ll think of a way to test this.”

29. According to Plan

Hatch sat back in a tucked leather chair in his plush, mahogany paneled office at the academy.

Four flat-screen television monitors played on one wall. All were set to different channels, but all of them were covering the same story.

In the past hour, two British Airways jets leaving London's Heathrow Airport had crashed shortly after takeoff, strewing wreckage across miles of coastland. He watched it all with a knowing smile.

His phone buzzed. "Sir, your phone call."

"Is the line secure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Put him through."

Hatch lifted the receiver. "Hatch."

The voice was gravelly and coarse with a slight British accent. "I just heard the news. Well done."

"Just as planned."

"BA is claiming mechanical difficulties."

"That's a little hard to swallow with two wrecks within the same hour, but not surprising. They have to tell the public something. So far there are also three terrorist groups claiming responsibility, but they're late to the party—we gave British Airways a specific schedule a week in advance. There will be another accident each day they don't meet our payment schedule."

"Has any money been transferred yet?"

“Not yet. But it will. We’re offering them a bargain. Those 747-800s are going for a little over three hundred million dollars each, not to mention the lawsuits and loss of business. British Air can pay the ransom or shut down.”

“Who’s next?”

“Emirates airline. As soon as they saw the British Airways crash they responded to our demand. First payment is seventy-five million. With all that oil money they won’t even miss it.”

“Where’s our boy?”

“Still in London. As soon as we get payment we’ll move him to Rome.”

“Very well. Take good care of him.”

“We have a whole contingency with him. He’s got more security than the queen.”

“Too bad we don’t have a few more just like him.”

Hatch smiled. “We might. We found the last Glow.”

“You found Michael Vey?”

“Yes. And we ran a diagnosis of Vey’s E patterns. He has the strongest el-waves we’ve come across yet. He could be the most powerful Glow of them all.”

“Promising. Where are you keeping him?”

“We don’t have him yet. But we have his mother. And he’s on his way to Pasadena right now. He has the idea that he’s going to rescue his mother. He’ll be disappointed to learn that she’s not here.”

“Will he cooperate?”

“You know what it’s like bringing in these Glows when they’re older. But he’s been living just a little above poverty and like I said, we have his mother. He’ll be persuaded.”

“Inform the board the moment you have him.”

“Of course.”

Hatch set down the phone. He loved it when a plan came together. And everything was going according to plan.

30. Chickens and Eagles

Upon their return to the academy, Tara and Griffin helped Taylor carry her purchases to her new room on the third floor of the building—a beautiful, well-lit suite across the hall from Tara’s. The room had wood floors with a thick Persian rug and a two-hundred-year-old antique French armoire across the room from her four-poster bed. The room was much larger and nicer than hers at home and had its own bathroom and walk-in closet.

Taylor noticed that the windows didn’t open and were made of something other than glass. Tara had assured her that it was for her protection, not to keep her in, but Taylor still had her doubts.

While she was thinking about where to put her new clothes Tara walked in. “Need any help?”

“I’m just deciding where to put it all.”

Tara picked up one of Taylor’s new skirts. “I think we should share clothes just for the fun of it. I’ve always wanted to do that but no one here is my size.” She turned back to Taylor. “So are you excited about your party tonight?”

“I guess.”

“You don’t sound excited.”

“I’m still homesick.”

Tara walked over next to her. “I know. But once you get to know everyone, you’ll feel a little better.”

Taylor sat on her bed. “I don’t know about that. I really just want to go home. Don’t you miss your family?”

“What do you mean?”

“The family who adopted you.”

“Oh. They’re gone.”

“Gone?”

Tara sat on the bed next to her. “Well, I started coming to the academy when I was six. I’d stay here all week then sleep at home on the weekends. It was a good arrangement. Then one day there was an accident. My parent’s house caught fire and they didn’t get out. Fortunately I wasn’t there, or I probably would have died too.”

Taylor was stunned. “That’s horrible. Do they know what caused the fire?”

“The fire department said it was an electrical fire. Ironic, huh?”

Taylor had a sick feeling about it. All the fun of the day drained away. She thought about the man visiting her house and talking to her parents. She hoped one day her house wouldn’t catch fire too.

“What if it wasn’t an accident?”

Tara squinted. “What do you mean?”

Taylor saw the look on Tara’s face and decided against pursuing it.

“Nothing,” she said. “So the state let you to stay here?”

“Fortunately, in the school contract, there was a clause that in case something happened, Hatch received guardianship. I was so young at the time I don’t remember much. I’ve lived here most of my life. This is my family. That’s why I am so excited for you to join us.”

“How many live here?”

“Nine, counting you.”

“Will Nichelle be there?”

“Yeah. But just ignore her. That’s what we all do.” Tara started counting on her fingers. “There’s Quentin, he’s the cute blond, you’ll like him. And he’s a flirt. There’s Bryan, he’s Puerto Rican, big muscles, but he’s really immature. Kylee, who I love, she was my best friend until you came along. I think she might be a little jealous of you, so I’ll give her some special attention tonight. Zeus. He’s kind of cute, but I need to warn you that he kind of smells. But don’t say anything to him about it.”

“I don’t usually tell people they stink when I first meet them,” Taylor said.

Tara grinned. “It’s not really his fault. Because of his electric makeup, he can’t bathe without shocking himself. Anyway, he’s really sensitive about it.”

Taylor nodded.

“There’s Grace. She’s really shy, so it will take a while before you get to know her. And there’s Tanner. He’s out of the country right now on an assignment.”

“How many of us are there?”

“There were seventeen of us in the beginning, but there’s only thirteen of us left. And some of them aren’t in the family.”

“What do you mean, ‘left’?”

Tara frowned. “Don’t worry about it.”

Taylor looked down. Hearing that four of them had disappeared scared her as much as anything else that had happened to her. “Do they all have powers?” she asked.

“Every one of them.”

“What kind?”

“All sorts. We don’t really talk about that. I mean, of course we know. Like Zeus can shoot electricity like lightning, Bryan can burn through things, and Kylee’s like a magnet, which means you don’t ever give her your credit card because she ruins them, and everyone knows what Nichelle can do. But it’s more of a gossip thing. Dr. Hatch says we don’t talk about it because it’s like in the business world, employees don’t talk about each other’s paychecks because it causes problems.” Tara glanced up at the clock on the wall. “Is that really the time?”

“I think so.”

She grabbed Taylor’s hand. “Come on. We can’t be late.”

The girls hurried downstairs to the main floor. The other youths had already arrived and the dining room was loud with chatter. The dining room tables had been brought together to form one long rectangle, large enough to seat the whole family. Taylor and Tara were the last to arrive and every eye followed them in.

A handsome blond boy stood as they entered and smiled at them. “Wow, I’m seeing double.”

“I’m Tara,” Tara said, bowing a little.

“And that makes you Taylor,” he said, slightly bowing. “I’m Quentin. I’m the student body president. Welcome to Elgen Academy.”

“Hi,” Taylor replied shyly. “I mean, thank you.”

“Welcome to the family.” He took her arm. “Let me introduce you to the rest of the gang. That’s Bryan.”

“Woo hoo,” Bryan said, pumping his fist in the air. “I’m number one.” He punctuated his claim with a loud belch.

“Number-one dork,” Quentin said.

“I told you,” Tara whispered to Taylor. “Immature.”

“And that’s Zeus.”

Zeus bobbed his head. Taylor noticed that he was seated with spaces between him and the others and she remembered what Tara had said about his smell.

“That’s Kylee and Grace.”

“Hi,” Kylee said tersely.

Grace looked at her but said nothing.

Quentin said to Taylor, “Don’t take it personally, Grace is a little shy. She’s that way to everyone at first.” He looked at Nichelle, who was sitting alone at the far end of the table. “You’ve already met

Nichelle,” he said. Nichelle glared at Taylor.

“There’s also Tanner but he’s out of the country. You’ll meet him in a couple of weeks. Since you are the guest of honor, Dr. Hatch asked me to seat you at the head of the table. He will sit to your right. And Tara,” Quentin said, “Dr. Hatch requested that you sit on Taylor’s left side.”

“Whatever you say, boss,” Tara said.

Tara led her to the front of the table and Taylor sat down. Bryan said, “Hey, you guys look alike.”

“We’re twins, idiot,” Tara said.

“You’re such a dork,” Kylee said to Bryan, rolling her eyes.

Taylor looked around. She caught Zeus staring at her. He looked away. She thought he was cute. A moment later Dr. Hatch walked into the room.

“Sorry I’m late, everyone. I was just finishing up a call.” He sat down at the head of the table. “You’ve all met Taylor?”

“I introduced her around,” Quentin said.

“Thank you, Quentin. Now I expect you all to make her feel right at home.”

“Where are you from?” Kylee asked.

“Idaho.”

“Where’s that?”

“Kylee, don’t embarrass yourself with your ignorance,” Dr. Hatch said flatly.

Taylor said, “Idaho’s on the other side of Washington, above Utah, west of Montana.”

“Thank you, Taylor,” Hatch said. “I guess I’ll have to talk to Miss Marsden about her geography lessons.” Hatch lifted a small brass bell next to his plate and shook it. Waiters immediately appeared with platters of food.

The chef had prepared a remarkable feast, though Taylor wasn’t very hungry after the lunch they’d had. The servers brought in trays full of beef Wellington, Yorkshire pudding, and roasted lamb with vegetables and potatoes. Taylor filled her plate, but mostly just picked at it as she glanced back and forth at each of the others. Quentin was definitely in charge, and the most popular of them all. She guessed that Kylee and Tara had a crush on him and Zeus seemed jealous of him.

“Do you find the cuisine agreeable?” Hatch asked her.

“Yes, sir. It’s very good.”

“It’s not pizza, but hopefully it’s easier on your stomach than the sushi.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I think you’ll like the dessert as well. We’re celebrating some favorable news we got out of the U.K. today, so everything is English. In keeping with the theme, dessert is an English trifle.”

“Yum,” Kylee said. “Yum, yum, yum.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Nichelle said.

“And you’re an ugly, psycho freak,” Kylee said.

“Ladies,” Hatch said. “Enough.”

“Sorry,” they both said to Hatch, but not to each other.

When they had finished their meals the waiters brought out the trifles, as well as cake, fruit, and pudding served in tall crystal chalices that looked like parfait glasses.

“This is delicious,” Taylor said.

“Overall I’m not a huge fan of English cuisine,” Hatch said, “but they do some things right.”

As everyone was finishing their desserts, Hatch looked at his watch, then rang the bell. The head server came walking out. “Yes, sir.”

“Pour the wine, please.”

“Right away, sir.”

Two other servers came out with bottles of wine and moved around the table, filling the glasses with Chianti wine.

Taylor had never tasted wine. “You drink wine?” she asked Tara.

Tara smiled. “Of course. We’re treated like adults here. How many fifteen-year-olds do you know with a black credit card?”

Hatch lifted his glass. “I’d like to raise a toast to the newest, reunited member of our family, Taylor.”

Everyone lifted their glasses, including Kylee, who hadn’t said anything since Hatch’s reprimand.

“To Taylor. May our dreams be her dreams, and may all her dreams come true.”

“Here, here,” said Quentin.

Everyone began tapping glasses, except Nichelle, who just took a long drink.

“In honor of this special occasion, and other good news, I have a very special treat. I have secured front-row tickets for tonight’s Colby Cross concert at the Staples Center.”

Everyone cheered.

“Colby Cross?” Taylor said, genuinely excited. “She’s my favorite singer.”

“I know,” Hatch said as he stood. “So we’d better be on our way. The limos await.”

At Hatch’s lead everyone stood and followed him out of the room, Zeus and Nichelle leaving last.

As they climbed into the car Taylor said to Tara, “I can’t believe we have front-row seats to Colby Cross!”

“I told you Dr. Hatch would take good care of you. You have nothing to worry about.”

Taylor sighed. “It’s just the way everything started—being kidnapped was really scary.”

“I know. I think he’s trying to make up for that. Just keep an open mind, sis. You’ll be glad you did.”

Taylor sat back into the leather seat and for the first time since her abduction she really smiled. Maybe Tara was right. Maybe what she’d read in Dr. Hatch’s mind was false. After all, he’d been nothing but generous and kind. Maybe if her parents had known how well the students were treated they would have wanted her to come. She didn’t know what to believe any more. “Front-row seats,” she said again. “It’s just so hard to believe.”

“Believe it,” Tara said. “It’s your new life, Taylor. First-class, front-row everything.”

A half hour later the limos pulled up to the front of the Staples Center and everyone got out. Once inside the arena an usher checked their tickets, then escorted them to the front row.

As the group was walking to their seats a large, muscular man, with his arm around a woman, bumped into Zeus.

“Hey, watch it,” Zeus said.

The man looked over his shoulder and grinned. “Dude, you stink.

Take a shower.”

The woman laughed.

Zeus turned red. “Is that your girlfriend or is Farm Town missing a goat?”

The man stopped and turned around. “What did you say?”

“Did I stutter? I called your girlfriend a goat, dork.”

The man flushed with anger. “You’re gonna die, loser.” He came at Zeus, grabbing him by the arm. “I’m gonna—” Bolts of electricity shot out of Zeus’s fingers. The man cried out and dropped to the ground like a bag of concrete. His girlfriend screamed.

Zeus kicked the man in the side. “Like that, loser?” Suddenly Zeus bent over in pain. “Aargh . . .”

Hatch stood above him with Nichelle at his side. Hatch’s face was red with fury. “Thank you, Nichelle.”

“Glad to help, sir.”

Just then two security officers arrived on the scene. The larger of the two asked, “What’s going on?”

The man’s girlfriend pointed at Zeus. “Him!” she screamed. “He shot my boyfriend.”

Hatch stepped forward. “Excuse me, officers, but I witnessed the entire exchange. The man was acting peculiar, then he just collapsed.”

Hatch looked at Tara and slightly nodded.

Suddenly the girlfriend began screaming at the top of her lungs

“Snakes! There are snakes everywhere!” She began flailing wildly.

“Get them off me! Get them off me!”

The guards looked at each other. One pulled out his radio. “Requesting backup near section AA. Also medical assistance, possible drug overdose.” While one of the guards struggled to restrain the woman the other said to Hatch, “Thanks for your help.”

“Don’t mention it.”

When the security guard had turned away Hatch grabbed Zeus by the arm and pulled him aside. “Out to the car. Now.”

“But the concert . . .” He doubled over again. “Sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“No, it won’t. Now go.”

Zeus staggered toward the exit. Hatch shook his head.

“Totally against family policy,” Tara said. “Boy, he’s gonna get it when we get back.”

“What will Dr. Hatch do to him?” Taylor asked.

“Nichelle will punish him for a while. She just loves doing that. Then he’ll lose privileges for a few weeks and probably be grounded to his room for a few days.”

Hatch walked back to the group, Nichelle at his side. “Sorry about that,” he said to Taylor. “Zeus knows better than to use his gift to hurt others.”

Taylor looked at Nichelle and Nichelle’s eyes narrowed as she glared back at her.

“Let’s not let Zeus’s unfortunate decision put a damper on things. Our seats await.”

Their seats were perfect, front row and center, unlike anything Taylor had ever dreamed she would experience. In spite of everything, she was giddy with excitement. When Colby came onstage the arena erupted in smoke and pyrotechnics and everyone jumped to their feet. Taylor couldn’t believe how close she was to the singer.

Colby started the concert with one of Taylor’s favorite songs, “*Stay With Me*.” Several times the singer came to the front of the stage and reached out her hand and Taylor actually got to touch her.

After an hour and a half the stage lights darkened for intermission.

“Nichelle,” Hatch said, “go get Taylor and me a couple of Cokes.”

“Okay,” she said, glaring at Taylor. After she left Hatch leaned over to Taylor. She noticed he had put on his dark glasses. “Are you having a good

time?”

“More than I can say. Thank you, Dr. Hatch.”

“You’re welcome. We’re just so pleased to have you with us.”

“I’m pleased to be here. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure, really. But now that you ask, could I ask a small favor of you?”

“Of course.”

“I’d like to see your gift in action. Sometime during Colby’s next few songs, I want you to reboot her—when I tell you to.”

Taylor looked at him. “I’m sorry. What?”

He smiled. “Just for fun. No one will know.”

Taylor swallowed. “I don’t know . . .”

Hatch’s expression turned serious. “I’m asking you to do something for me, Taylor.”

Taylor swallowed again. She felt uncomfortable with the request, but after all that Hatch had done for her, she didn’t dare disobey.

It’s not really that big of a deal, she told herself. After all, hadn’t she done the same thing at the basketball game? “Okay,” she said hesitantly. “Just tell me when.”

Hatch’s expression lightened. “I’ll tap you on the sleeve.”

The applause was even louder when Colby came back onstage but this time, instead of excitement, Taylor felt dread. She took a deep breath. What Hatch had asked her to do was wrong, but what choice did she have?

Colby sang a few more songs and Hatch just watched quietly, smiling and even clapping. Every now and then he looked over at Taylor. Taylor began to hope that maybe he had forgotten or changed his mind. He didn't. Colby was in the middle of Taylor's favorite song, "*Love My Love*," when Hatch tapped Taylor's arm. Taylor looked at the singer.

"Now," Hatch said firmly.

"Yes, sir." Taylor cocked her head. It was a fast song and Colby's voice suddenly screeched, then stopped in the middle of the chorus, as if she'd forgotten what song she'd been singing. For a few seconds she just looked around, unsure of where she was, while the band kept on playing. Then she grabbed the microphone and started singing, starting again with the first verse. At the end of the song there was a strange hesitancy in the arena, followed by the usual thunderous applause.

"Wow," Colby Cross said into the microphone. "Never had that happen before. I just kind of blacked out. Early onset Alzheimer's, huh?"

"That's okay Colby! We love you!" a boy shouted from a few rows back. Colby laughed at herself and the crowd applauded again.

Taylor looked over at Hatch. He was smiling and nodding approvingly. "Well done," he said. "Well done."

Taylor sat quietly for the rest of the concert, even when everyone stood for an encore. She felt sad. She had betrayed someone she admired.

After the concert, they returned to the limos. Dr. Hatch switched cars, presumably to talk to Zeus, so Taylor, Tara, Bryan, Kylee, and Nichelle sat in the back, Bryan switching places with Dr. Hatch.

Taylor desperately wanted to talk to Tara but didn't want to talk in front of the others, so she was silent the whole way home, even when Bryan and Kylee got in a brief argument about who was a better singer, Colby Cross or Danica Ross, and they asked her for her opinion. "They're both good," she finally said.

“Yeah?” said Kylee. “At least Danica doesn’t forget the words to her own songs.”

The comment made Taylor’s stomach hurt. She was glad when Nichelle threatened to silence both of them if they didn’t shut up.

That night, as Taylor was getting ready for bed, Tara walked into her bedroom. Tara was already in her silk pajamas.

“So, what’s up?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you always get depressed after seeing your favorite singer?”

“No.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

Taylor sat down on her bed, her hands clasped between her legs.

“Do you know when Colby was singing “Love My Love” and suddenly stopped singing? Tara smiled. “That was you?”

She nodded. “Dr. Hatch made me do it.”

Tara looked at her. “Is that all?”

“Is that all? I embarrassed her in front of thousands of people.”

Tara shook her head. “C’mon, she’s a celebrity. They paid her a million dollars to sing for three hours, I think she’ll get over it. And besides, no one cared. You heard that guy yell from the crowd—they loved it. It made her seem more human.”

Taylor sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

“Dr. Hatch was just seeing you in action. Think of it as a cheerleading tryout. And you passed.”

“Does he do that often?”

“What?”

“Test you.”

“No. Just now and then to make sure you’re on board.”

“What if you’re not?”

Tara’s expression changed. “You know, you can make this good or bad, it’s up to you. It’s about attitude.”

“No, it’s about hurting someone else.”

“Dr. Hatch doesn’t hurt people just to hurt people. You saw how mad he was at Zeus for shocking that guy. Dr. Hatch is just . . . careful.”

“Does he ask you to do things?”

“Yeah. I mean, not much lately. More earlier.”

“And it never bothered you?”

“Nope.”

“Really? Never?”

She looked suddenly pained. “Once. But you get over it. At first you might hate it but before you know it, you’ll volunteer to do it.”

She forced a smile. “Why do you care? We’re better than them.”

“Them?”

“You know, people.”

Taylor looked at her. “We’re people. My parents are people.”

“Taylor, they’re not your parents. And we’re not people. We’re special.”

“Maybe you are, but I’m just a cheerleader.”

“I know it’s hard being different, but it’s like the story Dr. Hatch tells us about the chickens and the eagle.”

“What story?”

Tara’s face animated. “Oh, you’re going to like this. It goes like this: A farmer once found an abandoned eagle’s nest with an egg inside. Out of curiosity he took the egg home and put it under one of his chickens. The chicken hatched the egg and took care of the eagle like it was just another chick. As the eagle grew it walked around the coop with the chickens, pecking at the ground the way chickens do. “One day a wise man saw the eagle in the coop. ‘How do you keep the eagle from flying away?’ he asked the farmer. The farmer said, ‘It’s easy, because the eagle thinks he’s a chicken.’ “The wise man said, ‘But it’s not. And it’s wrong to keep it in this coop. Eagles are majestic birds and destined to fly.’ The farmer said, ‘Not this one. He’s sure he’s a chicken.’ The wise man said, ‘No, once an eagle always an eagle.’ “He then went out to the henhouse, picked up the eagle, and threw him in the air. ‘Fly, eagle!’ he said. But the eagle just fell to the ground. He tried it again, throwing the eagle higher. ‘Fly, eagle!’ but the eagle just fell again and went back to pecking in the dirt. “Then the wise man carried the eagle to the top of the henhouse and pointed the eagle toward the sun. ‘You are not a chicken, you’re an eagle. You were meant to soar high above the chickens. Now fly!’ and he threw the eagle up into the air. Suddenly the eagle stretched out its wings and took off into the sky.”

Tara looked into Taylor’s eyes. “You, me, all of us electric children are those eagles. Dr. Hatch is the wise man. If you just want to keep on pecking through life with the chickens, it’s up to you, sis. So what will it be, eagle or chicken?”

“But I like the chickens,” Taylor said.

Tara grinned. “Come on.”

Taylor sighed. “Of course I want to be an eagle.”

“Good. Then stop worrying so much about the chickens. They don’t matter. Eagles eat chickens. It’s not because eagles are bad, it’s just how they’re made.” Tara stood, then kissed Taylor on the top of her head. “Have a good night.”

“You too.”

“Light off?” Tara asked.

“Sure.”

Tara switched off the light and closed the door. Taylor lay back looking at the ceiling. “I miss the chicken coop,” she said softly.

She wanted to talk to someone who would understand. She wanted to see Michael. She wondered when she would see him again.

31. The Road

Ostin sat in the backseat of the Camaro, pressed up against the side, reading a book. I could tell he was still mad that I hadn't told him about Wade. For the most part Wade kept his distance, listening to his iPod and playing his DS.

A couple of hours into the drive Wade asked, "What are you reading?"

"A book. Ever seen one?"

"Ever seen a fist?"

"Knock it off," Jack said.

"Porky," Wade said. "Oink, oink."

"Stop it," Ostin said.

"Never seen a hog read before. Are you gonna eat the book when you're done?"

"Shut up."

"Oink, oink."

"Hey, Wade," Jack said. "Ever wonder what a thousand volts would feel like on your tongue?"

His grin disappeared. "No."

"Then keep your mouth shut."

He sat back and put his earbuds back in. I looked in the rearview mirror. Ostin looked pretty miserable. I felt bad for him. For his sake, I wished he hadn't come.

I turned to Jack. “Thanks.”

“Sorry about that.” A few minutes later Jack asked, “You an only child?”

“Yeah. How about you?”

“I’ve got two older brothers and a sister.”

“Are you the oldest?”

“No, I’m the youngest. I’m the only one still at home. One of my brothers is in Iraq. He’s a Marine.” He said this with obvious pride.

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah, he’s really cool. He even got a medal for bravery.”

“How about your other brother?”

His smile fell. “He’s in prison.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I didn’t know anyone in prison. I wanted to ask what he’d done but it didn’t feel right. I didn’t have to.

“He got really messed up on drugs. He and a guy were stealing snowmobiles to get money for drugs when the owner came out. The guy with him had a gun and he shot the man. My brother didn’t even know that he had a gun, but the way the laws are, he’s also guilty. So he’ll be in prison a long time.”

“Do you see him very much?”

“Nah, he’s in Colorado. I only see him once a year.” His voice lifted. “My sister’s doing real well, though. She married a guy who owns a chain of tanning salons. They have a real nice home and two little kids.”

“Do you see much of her?”

“Nah, she doesn’t have much to do with the family. She got married young to get away. That’s because my folks used to fight a lot before my mother left.”

I now understood why Jack locked kids in lockers. I’d probably be doing the same if I came from a home like his.

“What about you? What happened to your dad?”

“He had a heart attack.”

“Was he old?”

“No. My mom said he had a ‘bad ticker.’”

“That’s too bad.”

I looked back. Wade’s eyes were closed and he was still wearing his earbuds. I wasn’t sure if he was sleeping or just listening to music, but I figured that either way he couldn’t hear me.

“What’s Wade’s story?”

“Not good. His parents were alcoholics. His old man used to beat the tar out of him until the state took him away. He lived with foster parents until they put him with his grandma, but she don’t really want him. She’s not shy about telling him, either. You’d think an old lady would be nicer, but that prune could strip the bark from trees with her tongue. So he just hangs with me most the time. I’m kind of like his only family.”

“He’s lucky to have you,” I said.

Jack looked at me with a peculiar expression. “Thanks, dude.”

Then he looked back to the road. I swear his eyes were moistening. I turned away so I wouldn’t embarrass him.

It took us four hours to reach Winnemucca, Nevada. We stopped at a gas station to fill the Camaro's radiator with water, then we ate dinner at Chihuahua's Fiesta Restaurant. I got a burrito, Jack and Wade got two, and Ostin got the taco platter. We ate quickly, then got back on the road.

"So how do you do it?" Jack asked me.

"Do what?"

"Shock people."

I shrugged. "I don't know. It's like asking how you sneeze. It just happens."

"But you can control it . . ."

"Yeah. Usually."

"Why didn't you shock us when we shoved you in the locker the first time?"

"Because I'm not supposed to use the power. My mother didn't want anyone to find out. She was afraid something might happen."

"Like what?"

"Like what did. That's why they took her."

"I didn't tell anyone," Jack said.

"I know. It wasn't you."

"So you know who took her?"

"Some corporation."

"This is like a James Bond movie," Jack said. "What are you going to do when you get there?"

“I’m going to find my mother.”

“Hate to say it, but even if she’s there, it’s not like they’re going to just let you in. If they kidnapped her she’s going to be guarded.”

“I know. I’m making this up as I go.”

“I get it,” Jack said. He took a drink from his Red Bull and looked back at his watch. “We’ve got another ten hours. If we drive through the night we’ll be there by morning.”

“Then let’s drive through the night.”

“I need to pick up some more Red Bulls.” He reached in back and thumped Wade on the head, waking him.

He pulled his earbuds out. “What?!”

“Get some sleep. You’re driving from Bishop to Pasadena.”

32. Another Simple Request

That night Taylor had a dream.

She was down on a football field cheering while her parents were in the stands looking for her. She kept shouting, “I’m down here!” But they couldn’t hear her for all the noise. She woke crying.

A half hour later someone knocked on her door. One of the servants, a young, dark-headed woman who spoke broken English, handed her an envelope.

“Excuse me I bother you,” she said. “Bless you.”

Taylor opened the envelope.

Family Meeting

Library. 9:00 a.m. sharp. Attendance mandatory.

Be dressed casually, we will be leaving the academy.

—Dr. Hatch

Now what? she thought.

Taylor got dressed, then crossed the hall to find Tara but her twin had already left her room. She didn’t know where the library was but saw Quentin waiting for the elevator.

“Hey, Quentin.”

He turned, his usual smile on his face. “Hey, Tara.”

“I’m Taylor.”

He stopped and looked at her. “Of course you are. Sorry. I’ll figure it out eventually.” He put his hand on her back. “Do you have any birthmarks or anything I should look for?”

“Afraid not.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard. You’re prettier than she is.”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. We’re identical.”

They stepped into the elevator and Quentin pushed the button for the first floor.

“No, there’s something different about you. I swear it.”

Taylor ignored the comment. “Are we going to the library?”

“Yes. Just follow me.”

A few seconds later the elevator door opened.

“After you,” Quentin said.

“Thank you.” Taylor stepped out into the hall, followed by Quentin.

“Do we have family meetings a lot?”

“No. Just on special occasions.”

“So, do you know what it’s about?”

“Yes. But I can’t tell you. Doctor’s orders.” He grinned. “But you’ll be glad you went.”

They arrived at an open door and walked in together. “If you want, let’s hang out today,” Quentin said. “And by the way, you can call me Q. It’s easier.”

“Thanks, Q.”

He laughed. “Sounds funny when you say it like that. Talk to you later.”

Tara was already inside the library. She was standing next to Dr. Hatch and they both looked at Taylor as she entered. Taylor was sure they had been talking about her.

Bryan was the last to arrive, his hair sticking up on the side of his head as if he’d just rolled out of bed. Tara left Hatch’s side and sat down next to Taylor. “Morning, sis.”

“Morning.”

“Good morning, everyone,” Dr. Hatch said.

“Good morning, Dr. Hatch,” they said in unison.

“I have an announcement.” He turned to Taylor. “Taylor, since all of you were born around the same time, having individual birthday parties got to be a little ridiculous. So we started having one large family celebration instead. Sometimes we have great activities here at the academy and sometimes we travel to other places.”

“Yeah, deep sea fishing off Costa Rica, man,” Bryan said.

“My favorite was riding bikes through Tuscany,” Quentin said.

“That was cool,” Tara said to Taylor. “That was last year.”

Hatch smiled. “We’ve had some good times. I was thinking that since Taylor missed the family party, well, since she’s missed the last fourteen, it’s only fair that we have one especially for her.”

Everyone cheered, except Nichelle, who never looked happy.

Hatch reached into his coat pocket and brought out an envelope. “So this morning we are going to the Long Beach Arena for the X Games Motocross

finals.”

Bryan jumped up and high-fived Quentin.

“Oh yeah, oh yeah.”

Zeus sat quietly in his seat, looking angry. Taylor guessed he had been grounded from the activity.

Hatch added, “And of course, we have VIP seating. We’re so close to the action you can smell the fear.”

“All right,” Bryan yelled. “Smell the fear, this is going to rock!”

There was a chorus of thank-yous, which Taylor joined. “Thank you, Dr. Hatch.”

Hatch smiled at Taylor. “Nothing’s too good for family,” he said.

Then he added, “For my eagles.”

What he said bothered her. She knew that Tara had told him about their conversation the night before.

“You know it,” Bryan said. “We’re eagles! Chickens peck, eagles fly!”

“So let’s fly,” Hatch said. He stood and raised his hands. “The limos await. Pick up your box breakfast on the way out.”

Everyone jumped up except Zeus, who was slumped back in his chair, his legs spread, and his hands clasped between them. Zeus looked up at Hatch penitently, but Hatch walked past him without a word.

On the way to the cars, Taylor asked Tara, “What are the X Games?”

“Are you kidding?” Tara said. “Don’t they have television in Idaho? The X Games are only the coolest things in the world. They’ve been sold out for months.”

Quentin walked up behind her. “So Taylor, you want to sit by me at the games?”

Both Tara and Kylee frowned.

“Sorry, Quentin,” Dr. Hatch said. “I will have the honor of sitting next to this birthday girl.”

“Sorry, sir.”

The kitchen staff was waiting outside in the parking lot and handed each of them a boxed breakfast as they climbed into the limos. Inside the box was a carton of orange juice, a bagel, an egg and sausage croissant, a cup of yogurt, and, of course, a banana. Taylor spread cream cheese over the bagel, then sat back and watched the scenery. She was in such a different world—half dream, half night-mare. She was feeling more confused each day.

Her mother always told her that she was special—that she was going to leave her mark on the world. And here she was—a new life had been unfolded before her filled with opportunity, growth, wealth, power, and privilege. Just like her mother promised. So why did it all feel so wrong? She looked at Tara and Quentin. They weren’t bad. Maybe Tara was right. She needed to trust more and give Dr. Hatch a chance. After all, he had gone out of his way to welcome her. Didn’t all his efforts warrant a little consideration? Was he really so bad? She thought back to the time at Harry Winston’s, when she saw a glimpse inside Hatch’s mind. Could she have been mistaken? What if she was brainwashed?

She closed her eyes. It seemed just too much for her to figure out.

Sure, she was living a dream, but if it were up to her, she’d wake from it. Deep in her heart she wanted her little home, her friends from school, and her family. And all the front-row seats, gourmet meals, and diamond necklaces in the world weren’t going to change that.

The limos drove in through a special VIP entrance and the youths walked to the stadium through a background of X Game contenders gearing up and

revving their motorcycles.

Dr. Hatch showed his pass to a security guard and they were led out to the competition. Hatch was wearing his glasses again and he stood at the gate and watched as they filed past. “Nichelle, sit on the far end of the row, please.”

She frowned. “Yes, sir.”

“Taylor, Tara, you sit next to me.”

Taylor faked a smile. “Thank you.” She had been hoping he’d leave her alone. She was afraid he might ask her do something again.

They slid down the metal bench to their seats as the sound of the motorcycles filled the air like a swarm of angry bees. “What’s the X stand for?” Taylor asked.

“It’s short for *extreme*,” Tara said.

Taylor nodded. It certainly was. The motocross jumping competition was one of the most amazing things she had ever seen. Each of the riders took a turn following a course of jumps, hills, and ramps, performing stunts off each one. They not only jumped from ramp to ramp, but the riders would do acrobatics in the air. The first rider took her breath away. He was more than eighty feet in the air when he did a handstand on his motorcycle’s handlebars.

“That’s incredible,” she said.

“That’s for sure,” Hatch said. “One mistake and you’re finished.”

“Watch,” Tara said. “This next guy is my favorite. He’s the first rider to do a double backflip on his motorcycle.”

Standing right in front of them was a squad of cheerleaders, or at least an X Games version of them. They were more like beautiful dancing girls in

bikinis. Still, seeing them filled Taylor with longing. She wished she were cheering. Hatch watched Taylor watch them.

“Do you miss that?”

She looked over. “Excuse me?”

“Do you miss your cheerleading?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He smiled sympathetically. “It’s too bad the academy doesn’t have enough students to field a team. I guess it’s just one of the sacrifices of being special. We do, however, have some very interesting connections. If, in a few years, you’d like to be a cheerleader for the Dallas Cowboys football team, I could pull some strings and make it happen.”

Taylor looked at him in amazement. “Really?”

“I know that’s little consolation in the meantime, but still, you must admit that there are some overriding benefits to being a part of the academy.”

“Yes,” Taylor said.

“Indeed,” Hatch said. He looked down at his watch. “It’s almost lunchtime. Taylor, what will you have to eat? They have ice cream, pizza, sodas, hot dogs.”

“I’d like a hot dog,” Taylor said.

“Great. And you, Tara?”

“I just want an ice cream.”

He handed Tara a hundred-dollar bill. “Please get us two dogs, a beer, and whatever you want.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Tara was gone Hatch leaned toward Taylor. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you. I wanted to apologize.”

“For what?”

“I’m really sorry about how all this started. I can understand why you might think we’re terrible. I just hope you understand by now that our objectives are all in your best interest, as well as the world’s.”

“I understand. Tara’s explained it,” Taylor said, even though she wasn’t sure how much she believed.

“Good. The truth is, if you’re going to change the world you don’t always have the luxury of time or convention. You can’t make omelets without breaking a few eggs, can you?”

“I guess not.”

“No, you can’t. Now tell me about your friend, Michael.”

Hearing him say Michael’s name filled Taylor with dread. “What do you want to know?”

“What’s he like?”

“He’s nice.”

“I noticed from his report that he’s spent a fair amount of time in school detention. Is he a troublemaker? Rebellious?”

She didn’t want to talk about Michael but she wasn’t sure how to avoid it.

“No. He’s a good kid. I think he’s just unlucky.”

“Unlucky,” Hatch repeated. “Well, his luck is about to change.”

Taylor didn’t know what to say. Just then Hatch reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “Hello?”

Taylor looked back out over the grounds, happy for the interruption. After a few more minutes Tara returned with the food. “There you go,” she said, handing Taylor two hot dogs and a beer. “Give this to Dr. Hatch.”

Taylor handed him the beer and dog. She unwrapped her own hot dog and lost herself in the competition. After a few more competitors, Taylor turned to Tara. “This is really cool!” she shouted.

Tara smiled. “The coolest. Didn’t I tell you?”

Taylor was applauding an amazing jump when Hatch leaned over to her. “See that next rider? The one in the yellow jacket?”

She nodded. “He’s really cool.”

Hatch said, “He’s currently tied for first and this is his last chance to score. I don’t want him to win.”

Taylor looked at him, wondering why he was telling her that.

“I don’t want him to win,” he repeated.

“Then hopefully he won’t do his best.”

“Hope isn’t a plan,” Hatch said. “It’s blind faith in luck. It’s chance. Winners don’t ever leave things to chance. So when he’s in the middle of his jump, I want you to reboot him.”

Taylor just looked at him. “But he’ll crash.”

“That’s a distinct possibility.”

“It could kill him.”

“That’s also a possibility, but that’s the risk you take in these types of sports. Why do you think all these people are here?”

Taylor's forehead furrowed with concern.

Hatch leaned back, his expression changing some. "I'm not asking much, Taylor. I just want to see if you have what it takes to fit in with us."

Taylor swallowed. Below her the rider rode up to the platform at the top of the ramp. He had removed his helmet and was waving to the excited crowd while cameras flashed around him. He blew a kiss to a woman holding a baby, who Taylor guessed was his wife, then he pulled his helmet back on and began revving his engine. Dr. Hatch leaned back and sipped his beer.

Tara looked at her, then leaned close. "You gotta do it, Taylor. He's not kidding."

"He's asking me to kill someone."

"He's asking you to prove your loyalty. Chicken or eagle, sis?"

"I can't do it."

Tara looked at her nervously. "You have to."

"No, I don't," Taylor said.

"You don't understand. You have to do what Dr. Hatch says."

"What if I don't?"

Tara's eyes widened with fear. "You don't want to find out."

The motorcycle took off. It dipped low, then shot off the end of the ramp, sailing sixty feet in the air. Camera flashes popped as the bike sailed through the sky. The rider twisted back and was in the middle of his second flip when suddenly the bike went awry. The crowd screamed as the bike landed sideways on the opposite ramp, flipping tail over front while the rider flopped across the ground behind it until he slammed into a retaining wall below a long row of bleachers. The rider lay motionless. The woman

he had blown a kiss to was running toward him as emergency crews sprang into action, accompanied by the sound of a siren.

Hatch stood and looked at Taylor, then Tara, his face bent in anger. “We’re going,” he said fiercely, brushing past Taylor. “Nichelle, with me.”

The entire family stood. As they slid down the bench Taylor said to Tara. “What happened? I didn’t do that.”

Tara was furious. “All he asked for was a show of faith. Was that too much?”

“He asked me to kill someone.”

“So what.”

“So what?” Taylor said. “How can you say that?”

Tara turned on her. “They’re just people!”

The limousines were waiting where they’d been dropped off and the drivers jumped out at their approach, opening the car doors. Even though no one spoke to her, Taylor could feel everyone’s anger directed at her. She wondered how they all knew. Hatch didn’t say a word the whole way back.

At the academy, the driver opened his door and Hatch climbed out, followed by the other three girls. “Tara, go to your room and wait for me.”

Tara furtively glanced at her. There was fear in her eyes and they began welling up with tears. “Yes, sir,” Tara said and quickly ran off.

Taylor was afraid for both of them.

Hatch pointed at Taylor. “You come with me.”

Nichelle looked at her, a half smile crossing her face. Taylor shivered. “Yes, sir,” she said. Taylor followed Hatch to the elevator. He pushed a button marked D and they descended. When the door opened, they stepped out into

a dark corridor. Taylor followed Hatch while Nichelle quietly followed a few yards behind her. They stopped in front of a heavy metal door. Hatch turned to Taylor. “Would you like to explain to me what happened?”

“Nothing, sir. I didn’t do anything.”

“Precisely.” He shook his head. “After all I’ve done for you . . . all I asked for was a simple demonstration of loyalty and gratitude and this is how you thank me.”

Taylor was terrified. “But he fell . . .”

Hatch tapped his glasses. “I can see when you use your powers. Tara decided to step in for you. I will deal with her later.”

“She was only trying to protect me.”

“Yes. And deceive me.”

“It’s my fault”

“Yes, it is. If you had acted with integrity none of this would have been necessary.” He opened the door to expose a large, dark room.

“I’m so very disappointed in you, Taylor. I extended a hand of friendship and you bit it. I had sincerely hoped we could do this the easy way. I guess I was wrong.” He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the room.

“You’re hurting me,” Taylor said.

“You have no idea what hurt is. But you will. Nichelle, Miss Ridley needs a little lesson in gratitude—about an hour’s worth to begin with. Oblige me.”

A sadistic smile lit Nichelle’s face. “I’d be happy to.”

Nichelle stepped inside the dark room and Hatch shut the door behind the girls. He could hear Taylor’s screams even before he reached the other end of the corridor.

33. The Lesson

Taylor was curled up on her side, shaking with pain. Her clothes were soaked with sweat and her face was streaked with tears. “Please stop,” she sobbed. “Please.”

“I’ll stop when Dr. Hatch tells me to stop.”

“You’re one of us. How could you do this to us?”

“It’s what I do.”

“You hurt others?”

“We all do what we were born to do. Out there, I’m no one. If it weren’t for the academy I’d be flipping hamburgers somewhere. But in here, I’m a VIP.”

“You’re a sellout.”

Nichelle sneered. “Aren’t you the saint? In the end, everyone sells out. Even the saints.”

“You’re wrong,” Taylor said, her voice strained. “Some people would rather die than hurt others.”

“Well, you might just get your wish.” She walked over and slapped Taylor on the head. “Did I hear you’re a cheerleader?” She cleared her throat. “Were a cheerleader.”

Taylor didn’t answer.

“I hate cheerleaders. Stuck-up, shallow imbeciles.” She crouched down next to Taylor. “Don’t you know how stupid you look out there shaking your pom-poms?”

“At least I’m not hurting anyone.”

“No? How about all those girls who wanted to be cheerleaders and weren’t pretty enough or popular enough? You think you’re so good. It’s easy to be good when everyone’s kissing your feet—when you have perfect skin and teeth.” She grabbed Taylor by the hair and lifted her head. “In here you’re no one, cheerleader. You remember that. You can’t even walk unless I say so. If they let me, I could drain you like a bathtub and watch you die. So how about a cheer for me? Because in here, I’m the star quarterback.”

“Until they don’t need you anymore,” Taylor said. “Then you’ll be thrown out with the rest of the trash.”

Nichelle yanked Taylor’s hair. “Don’t push your luck, cheerleader,”

Nichelle growled. “I don’t always stop when they tell me to.” She let go of Taylor’s hair and Taylor fell to the ground. “Oh, they’ll always need me. As long as there’re mutants like you out there, they’ll need me.” Nichelle stood up. “And our session isn’t over yet. So just sit back and enjoy yourself.” She smiled darkly. “I know I will.”

34. Purgatory

Taylor was still unconscious when she was taken by gurney from the holding room where Nichelle had punished her into a reinforced cell. She had no idea what time it was when she woke, or how long she'd been out. She was lying on her stomach on a vinyl mat that was too short for her.

Her head was throbbing and she groaned with pain. She couldn't see much—the only light in the room was a series of small red diodes blinking from the security cameras—and she was even more afraid than before. She thought of her home, her mother and father, and began crying. “I want to go home,” she said to herself.

“I know,” someone close to her said softly.

She was startled by the voice. She tried to crawl away but couldn't. She couldn't move.

“Be still. I'm not going to hurt you.” Just then a hand gently touched her. She could feel the skin against hers and she entered his mind. It was peaceful and soft and safe.

Taylor looked up. Her eyes had adjusted some to the darkness and she could see kneeling next to her was an African-American boy. He appeared to be about her age, though he was much larger than her.

He was kneeling next to her and gently stroking her back. She could see the pale glow of his skin. He was one of them.

“Please don't hurt me,” Taylor said.

“I won't hurt you, Taylor. I'm a friend.”

“You know my name.”

“Yes.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Ian.”

“You’re one of them,” she said.

“I am one of you, not them.”

“Where are we?”

“We’re on Level D. This is where they put the disobedient ones.

We call it Purgatory.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“There are three of us who won’t obey Hatch. Four, counting you.

So what did you do? Or I should ask, what didn’t you do?”

“Hatch wanted me to cause an accident at the motorcycle show. I could have killed the rider.”

“That’s one of Hatch’s tricks.”

“Tricks?”

“First, he tries to buy you. He makes you feel obligated so he can manipulate you by guilt. If you’re stronger than that he tries to get you to do something wrong. Something small at first, then he increases it. Once you cross the line, he has you. He will hold it over you forever and he keeps upping the ante. You’re lucky you’re down here. Because if you were still up there, you’re a murderer.”

“My sister Tara’s not a murderer.”

“Yes she is. Tara, Bryan, Zeus, Quentin, Grace, Kylee, Nichelle, Tanner. They’ve all sold out. That’s why they’re up there and we’re down here.”

“She’s my sister.”

“She’s your twin,” Ian said. “She was younger than most of us when they started with her. She couldn’t fully grasp what she was being asked to do until it was too late.”

Taylor tried to move but the pain made her groan out.

“Just stay still. Nichelle’s drained the juice out of you. It takes a while to come back.” He left her side, then returned with a cup of water. “Have something to drink. It helps.”

Ian guided the cup to Taylor’s lips. She drank thirstily.

When she had finished drinking she asked, “Did they do this to you?”

“Yes. Many times. But not as bad. I think they mostly keep me

here because my powers aren’t as aggressive, so I’m not as valuable to them. That and because I’m blind.”

“You’re blind?”

“My eyes are. I’m not.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I can see, just not with my eyes. I see the same ways sharks and electric eels see; through electrolocation. Instead of using light waves to see, I use electric waves.”

Taylor remembered learning about that in biology.

“Electrolocation has its advantages. Like, it doesn’t matter if it’s day or night and I can see through solid objects. You can too, of course—as long as the object permits light waves to pass through them, like glass or ice; but most solids don’t. I can see through anything electrons can pass through.”

“You can see outside these walls?”

“I can see outside the school. Unless Nichelle’s around. Then I’m blind.”

“Can you see me?”

“Yes. You look just like Tara.” Ian sat back on his haunches. “I have no way of comparing my sight to yours, since I’ve never seen through my eyes. But I have a pretty good idea of the difference between your sight and mine. I can also see Glows and I can see how power is used.”

“Like Hatch’s glasses,” Taylor said.

Ian nodded. “Yeah. They studied me to learn how to make them.

You know, this place is a laboratory. They’re constantly doing experiments.”

“Nichelle said they’re going to dissect me.”

“A dead Glow does them no good. She just knows how to frighten you. It’s what she’s good at.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Three years.”

Taylor began to cry. “I can’t do it.”

“You will. You’re stronger than you think you are.”

Taylor buried her head in her hands.

“I want to introduce you to the others.”

“There’s others here?”

Ian smiled. “Like I said, there’s three of us.”

In spite of the pain, Taylor lifted her head and looked around. To her surprise there were two other girls. One was Chinese. The other was a blond with eyes blue enough that Taylor could see them in the room's lighting. Both of them were glowing.

"That's McKenna," Ian said.

The Chinese girl nodded. "Hi."

"Hi," Taylor said.

"And that's Abigail," Ian said.

"Hello," Taylor said.

Abigail knelt down next to her. "Hi Taylor. I'm going to touch you," she said softly. "It won't hurt. I promise." Abigail gently pressed her hand against Taylor's back and Taylor felt a light wave pass through her body, taking with it all her pain and fear.

Taylor exhaled with relief. "What are you doing to me?"

"I'm taking away your pain for a moment."

"You're healing me?"

Abigail shook her head. "No. I can't do that. I can only take away pain while I'm touching you. But when I stop it will come back."

"It feels so good right now."

"I'll do it for as long as I can," she said kindly. "It takes effort, but maybe I can hold out long enough for you to fall asleep."

"Thank you, Abigail."

"You can call me Abi."

“Thank you, Abi.”

“You’re welcome. Now try to get to sleep.”

Taylor closed her eyes and buried her head in her arms. Before she fell asleep she said, “I love you, Abi.”

Abigail smiled. “I love you too.”

35. Breaking into Prison

We arrived in Pasadena a little after nine. I was asleep in the backseat of the Camaro, lying across Ostin. I woke when we stopped for gas and to change drivers. Wade's eyes were bloodshot and he looked like he was about to pass out. He stumbled into the gas station to use the bathroom.

"Where are we?" I asked Jack.

"We're in Pasadena," he said. "I need the school's address."

"I've got it." I handed Jack the brochure, then got out of the car and stretched. The California air was moist and warm and in spite of my worries, it felt good. I looked in the back window and saw that Ostin was still snoring, so I went inside the gas station. I got two bottles of strawberry-flavored milk and a box of doughnuts. I knew Ostin would be hungry when he woke.

Wade had climbed in the back and already fallen asleep.

"Wade was pretty tired," I said.

"Yeah, he was. We would have been here sooner but he stopped in Lancaster and slept for two hours," Jack said. "Are you ready?"

I was blinking pretty hard. "No. Probably never will be. Let's go."

Jack smiled. "Nice."

Pasadena was lush and green with palm trees everywhere. I was eight when my mother and I moved from California and I hadn't been back since. The city already seemed foreign to me.

"Take Colorado Boulevard to South Allen," I said. "Then turn right."

Jack followed my directions and in a few minutes we were on Allen Avenue. "That's the place," I said. "It looks just like the picture. Except for

the prison fence.”

Jack parked the car at a gas station about a half block from the school.

“Wade, wake up,” he said.

“Who . . .”

“We’re here.”

Ostin woke as well and habitually started searching for his glasses. He had fallen asleep wearing them and I had picked them up off the car floor.

“Here you go,” I said, handing them to him.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“The school,” I said.

Ostin looked out at the building. “That’s a school?”

“Looks more like a prison than a school,” Wade said groggily.

“How are we going to get inside?” Ostin asked. “The fence is at least twelve feet high and there’s barbed wire.”

“And the entrance is guarded,” Wade added.

“Getting in is not going to be easy,” Ostin said. I think he meant “possible” instead of “easy.”

Jack shook his head. “He’s right, man. What are you going to do?”

I looked out at the building for a few more moments then I sighed. “Well, it’s not your problem. You got us here.” I reached into my pocket and took out the rest of the money. “Here’s the rest.”

Jack took it without counting. “Thanks. Good luck.”

“Thanks. C’mon, Ostin,” I said.

As we were climbing out of the car Jack said, “Look.”

I turned back toward the building. A white food services truck was passing through the gate. “Get back inside, I have an idea.”

We climbed back in and Jack started up the Camaro.

“What’s your idea?” I asked.

He put on his sunglasses, then pulled out into the street. “We’re going to borrow that van.”

“Borrow?” Ostin said.

“This is life and death, right?” Jack said.

“Absolutely,” I replied.

We followed the van at a distance for about six miles, until it pulled into a parking lot, where there was a fleet of identical vans.

Two men climbed out and walked into the building. As soon as they were out of sight Jack said, “Wade, follow us in the car.” He looked at Ostin and me. “Let’s go.”

Jack, Ostin, and I ran, slightly stooped, to the van. I figured we’d have to break the window to get in, but the van was unlocked and we quickly climbed in. Jack checked on top of the visor, then in the ashtray for a spare key but didn’t find one. He pulled out a pocketknife, reached under the dash, and began sorting through wires. It only took a few minutes for him to hotwire the car. “These old vans are easy picking,” he said.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” I asked.

“I’m not a car thief, if you’re wondering. My old man’s a mechanic.”

“I wasn’t wondering,” I said. “Just impressed.”

Jack drove out of the lot without drawing any attention. There was a CB radio mounted below the dashboard. Jack reached down and switched it on. “Better keep it on,” he said. “So we know when they discover the van’s missing.”

Ostin was sitting in the back of the van with a bunch of metal trays stacked on a trolley. He lifted a lid. “Hmm. Chicken cordon bleu,” he said.

“Don’t steal food,” I said.

“We just stole their van,” Ostin said. “I don’t think they’ll care about a few leftovers. Besides, it might be my last meal.”

“He’s got a point,” Jack said. “If they don’t let us in the gate, we’re screwed.”

“What’s our story?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” Jack asked.

“I doubt they’re expecting the food service people back so soon. We better have a story.”

“I’ve got one,” Ostin said. “Tell them we left a stack of trays with chicken cordon bleu in the kitchen and it will stink up the place if we don’t get it back.”

“Not bad,” I said. “I wonder if we’ll need ID.” I began looking around the van for paperwork or a badge but didn’t find anything.

“Nothing. All we’ve got is the story.”

“We can make it work,” Jack said.

Ostin said, “Hey, look at these.” In a back compartment there was a stack of white food service smocks and a sack of paper serving hats.

“Uniforms.”

Ostin lifted the smocks and hats out of the drawer and handed one to me and two to Jack. Even the smallest smock looked like a dress on me, but I put it on anyway. We drove back to the gas station parking lot, where Wade hopped out of the Camaro and climbed into the front seat of the van.

“Put these on,” Jack said, handing Wade a smock and hat.

“Sweet,” Wade said.

We circled the block and headed for the school. “Ready for this?” Jack asked.

“Yeah.” I said from the back.

“No problem,” Ostin said, looking terrified.

Jack pulled into the driveway and slowly up to the guard shack.

The guard, a stern, powerful-looking man in a navy blue security uniform, wore a gun at his hip. “What’s up?”

Jack looked surprisingly calm. “Sorry, we left a couple trays of blue chicken in the kitchen.”

The guard’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“You know, blue chicken, delicious from the oven but give it an hour out of the refrigerator and it’s going to be stinkin’ to high heaven. Stink up the kitchen, the dining area, the whole building.

That blue chicken is stinky. Whoo. Diaper stinky.”

The guard looked at him for a moment, then grinned. “All right. Go get your stinky chicken.”

“Thanks.”

The gate opened and we drove through.

“Blue chicken?” Ostin said. “It’s chicken cordon bleu.”

“Whatever,” Jack said. “It worked.”

He drove around the side of the building. We weren’t exactly sure where to go, but since there was only one open garage we pulled into it. In the back of it there was a door guarded by a man with a gun.

“Whoa,” I said. “We’ve got another guard.”

“Worse,” Ostin said. “See that plate by the door? It’s a magnetic switch. It’s like my dad’s office: you can’t get anywhere without a card. No card, no entry. You better find something.”

I looked through the glove compartment. “Nothing,” I said.

“What do I do?” Jack asked. “Pull in?”

“We have to now,” I said, “or they’ll know something’s up.”

“Maybe we could offer the guy some food,” Ostin said.

“Do you think of anything else?” Wade said.

“Wait,” I said, “He might be on to something. We’ll carry the trays in and ask the guy to open the door for us.”

Ostin sneered at Wade.

“Whatever we’re doing,” Jack said, “we better do it fast. ’Cause we’re here.”

36. A New Glow

“Taylor.”

Taylor slowly rolled over, again feeling the pain in her body. Ian was kneeling next to her.

“They’re listening to us, so talk softly. Do you know about the last electrochild?”

“What do you mean?”

“There were seventeen of us. They found all but two, you and one other.”

“Michael,” she said. “His name is Michael. Why?”

“There’s a new Glow outside the compound.”

“What does he look like?”

“He’s small, but the electricity around him is wild. Is he good or bad?”

“He’s good.”

Ian nodded. “Let’s hope he stays that way.”

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s with three other teenagers. I think they’re trying to find a way in.”

“We need to warn him that Hatch knows he’s coming. Can you warn him?”

Ian shook his head. “No. I can only see.”

Taylor covered her eyes. “I’ve failed him. I’ve failed everyone.”

“This isn’t your fault, Taylor. You’re a good person.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you’re down here.”

37. Discovery

Jack slowly pulled the van into the parking bay, put it in park, and killed the engine. The guard watched us intensely.

“Ready Ostin?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, looking very *unready*.

I slid open the side door and stepped out. I grabbed one of the metal containers, then started to the building’s entrance. The guard’s eyes were glued to me and his hand hovered above his gun. When I was a couple of yards from him he said, “Stop.”

I stopped. “Yes, sir.”

“Where’s your ID?” he asked.

I struggled to control my tics. “Sorry, it’s in my pocket. Would you mind getting the door for me?”

His expression didn’t change. “I need to see your ID.”

“You recognize me, don’t you? We talked last week.”

“I wasn’t here last week,” he said.

I gulped. “It must have been another guard. In those glasses you all look alike.”

“Your ID.”

I sighed. “Okay. Here, it’s just in my pocket. Hold this for one second.”

Jack opened his door and started to get out of the van. “Is there a problem?”

The guard turned to him, “Get back in the van. I need his ID and your ID.”

“I’m getting it,” I said. “Just give me a hand.” I pushed the tray toward the guard. He put his hands out, pushing back against the metal tray. “I’m not going to . . .”

I surged. His mouth opened but before he could make a sound he dropped to the ground unconscious. I set the tray on the ground.

“Whoa,” Jack said. “I’m glad you didn’t hit us with that much juice.”

“It was only half,” I said. “I’m getting more electric.”

Ostin jumped out of the van. “Good job, dude.”

“Don’t start high-fiving yet.” I took the lanyard from the man’s neck, then looked through his pockets for anything else we could use.

I pulled out a thick plastic card. “What’s this?”

“That’s a magnetic key,” Ostin said. I held up the lanyard. “Then what’s this?”

“Either a duplicate or you need two different keys.”

“Now what?” Jack asked.

“Tie him up in the van and get ready to roll. Ostin and I will go find my mom and Taylor and bring them here.”

“On it,” Jack said. “Good luck, dude.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“I wasn’t going to let you have all the fun.”

I took the magnetic key on his lanyard and swiped it across the black pad. The red diode turned green and the lock clicked. “We’re in.”

I pushed open the door. Inside was a long, brightly lit corridor with surveillance cameras on both ends. Ostin and I stepped inside.

“I’ve got the feeling we’re being watched,” Ostin said.

“Just act cool,” I said. “They’ll just think we’re food service guys.” I kept walking. “Where do you think she is?”

“Where does the dog hide the bone?”

“Just talk normal,” I said.

“Find an elevator.”

There was an elevator at the end of the hall. Inside the buttons were. 4-3-2-1-GL-D.

“What’s GL?” I asked.

“Ground level, or garden level if they’re being fancy. Push D.”

“What’s D?”

“I have no idea. But it’s below GL.”

I pushed the button but nothing happened. Outside I could hear footsteps coming down the hall.

“Look, it needs a key. Try yours.”

I shoved it in the slot but nothing happened. The footsteps got closer.

“Try the other key.”

I switched keys and the elevator door shut. “That’s it.”

The elevator began moving down. It stopped just a few seconds later and the door opened. I stuck my head out. We were in another corridor. The

overhead lights must have been on dimmer switches because they were barely illuminated. Also there were thick metal doors spaced every fifteen or twenty feet that looked a little like the door to the refrigerated room in the back of the grocery store where my mom worked. There were metal boxes outside each door with bright green diodes. The hall was empty but there were security cameras mounted at each end of the hall. It was eerie being in such a large building and seeing no one.

“What’s with all the security cameras?” Ostin asked.

“Dallstrom would be in heaven,” I said. “We better hurry,” I said. “I doubt the food service guys come down here.” We crept down the hall to the first door. The doors were thick metal with dark, mirrored glass in horizontal slits about four inches wide and a foot high.

I looked through the window on the first door. It was dark inside and I couldn’t see anything or anyone. I went to the next door and looked inside. It was also dark but I thought I could see a faint glow.

“I think there’s someone in this one.”

“Is it your mom?”

“No. Whoever it is, they’re glowing.”

“It could be Taylor,” Ostin said, “Try your keys.”

I swiped both of them over the keypad but nothing happened.

“It’s not opening.” I looked up and down the hall, feeling more nervous by the second.

“I bet it’s a magnetic lock,” Ostin said, looking it over. “You might be able to counter it with your electricity.” He crouched down to examine it, then nodded. “The secondary magnetic coil should be about here. Let me see your hand. Don’t shock me.”

I held it out. He guided it to one side of the lock and backed away. “Okay, now.”

I pulsed. There was a slight crackle of electricity but nothing happened.

“Give it more,” he said.

“Okay.” This time I pulsed with everything. The light in the hallway flickered and there was the clicking sound of movement. “Are you done?” Ostin asked.

“Yeah.”

Ostin grabbed the door and pulled it open. “It worked.”

“All right,” I said. I stepped into the room. It was dark except for the dim light coming from the hallway. I looked around, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

“Michael,” a voice said, “It’s me.”

There was a girl lying on the floor in the corner of the room. Even in the darkness I knew who she was.

“Taylor,” I said. “We found you.”

38. Michael's Induction

Taylor was barely able to move. I knelt down on the floor next to her.

“What have they done to you?”

She started crying. “I’m so sorry I led them to you.”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “It’s going to be okay, Taylor. We’re going to get you out of here. Have you seen my mother?”

“No. But they told me they have her.”

“Did they say where?” Ostin asked.

“No.”

“Taylor, what kind of school is this?”

“It’s not a school. It’s a laboratory.”

“A laboratory? For what?”

Another voice came from the darkness. “To learn how to make more of us.”

I spun around to see a young man standing on the other side of the cell. He looked about my age but was a full six inches taller. He was African-American and glowing. Standing behind him were two teenage girls, one Chinese, the other a tall blonde, who were both glowing as well. I’m not surprised that I hadn’t seen them, as they were in the opposite corner of the cell and I was only focused on Taylor. “I’m Ian,” the boy said. “I’ve been watching you and your friends since you arrived this morning.”

“From down here?”

“I see through electrolocation. I can see through the walls.”

“Like electric eels,” Ostin said. “That’s cool.”

“Why are you down here?” I asked.

“Around here you either do what Hatch says or you end up in the dungeon.”

“What’s a Hatch?” I asked.

“Hopefully you’ll never find out,” the Chinese girl said, walking toward us.
“I’m McKenna.”

The other said, “And I’m Abigail.”

“I’m Michael,” I said. “Do you also have powers?”

McKenna nodded. “I can make light and heat. Abigail can take away pain.”

“Electric nerve stimulation,” Ostin said. “Very interesting.”

I turned back to Ian. “Do you know who else is down here?”

“I can see everyone in the building,” he said.

“Do you know if my mother is here? They kidnapped her.”

“How long ago did they take her?”

“Just a week or so.”

Ian shook his head. “The only female prisoners are on the next floor up and they’ve all been here for more than a year.”

My heart fell.

Ian suddenly looked up toward the corner of the room. “Oh no,” he said.
“The two guys you came here with are being taken away by the guards.” He turned back toward me. “How did you get in here? In this room?”

“Michael demagnetized the door,” Ostin said. “With his electricity.”

Ian shook his head. “That’s impossible. The locks aren’t magnetic.

The sliding bolts are made of resin and work pneumatically. Everyone here has electrical gifts, so they prepared for that.” Ian looked back up.

“They’re coming.”

“Who’s coming?” I said.

Ian didn’t answer. He grabbed the girls and stepped away from the door, back to the corner of the room.

“If I didn’t open the door,” I asked, “then who did?”

A voice boomed from an unseen speaker. “That would be me, Michael. We’ve been expecting you. Welcome to Elgen Academy.”

There was suddenly a loud screech in my head and I felt dizzy, just as I had in the parking lot when my mother was taken. I fell against the wall, covering my ears. Everyone in the room groaned except Ostin, who looked around curiously at us. “What’s happening?”

“It’s Nichelle,” Ian said.

“What’s a Nichelle?” Ostin asked.

The cell door opened. The man I had seen outside the pizza parlor was standing there next to the creepy girl.

“Hello, Michael,” the man said. “I see the group has been reunited.” He stepped inside the room.

“Shock him,” Ostin said.

I took a step forward, then the screeching dropped me to my knees. Everyone else screamed.

Hatch turned to Ostin. “Ostin, isn’t it? I thought you were supposed to be smart.” He looked down at me. “What do you call yourself? The Electrokids? The Electroclub?”

“The Electroclan,” Ostin said.

“Right.” Hatch smiled darkly. “You don’t belong here, Ostin. But here you are.”

“I belong wherever Michael is,” Ostin said.

Hatch smirked. “Loyalty. I like that. Even when it’s misplaced, there’s something endearing about it. Unfortunately, this is where your relationship ends. Michael, if you’ll follow me, we’ll let Ostin stay here with the others.”

Ostin looked at me.

“I’m not leaving them,” I said.

An even higher-pitched screeching poured through my head, followed by an increasing tightness, as if a metal band had been put around my head and slowly cinched up. It was the same thing I had felt when my mother was taken—as if life itself were being drawn out of me through a straw.

“Aargh.” I fell to the ground, grabbing my temples.

“Stop it!” Taylor shouted. “Leave him alone.”

“Mike knows how to stop it,” Hatch said.

“Okay,” I shouted. “I’ll go.”

Hatch nodded at Nichelle and the sound and pain stopped. “Come along, Mike. I’m a busy man.”

I staggered to my feet. “My name is Michael.”

“A Glow by any other name is just as electric, but as you wish.”

I looked over at Ostin and Taylor. They both had fear in their eyes. “I’ll be back,” I said. I staggered out and the door automatically closed behind me. Halfway down the hall Hatch turned to me and said, “I sincerely hope you won’t be back to that place.”

“I belong with my friends.”

“Then the question is, will your friends still be there? And that is completely up to you.” The elevator door opened. “After you.”

“Where are we going?”

Hatch pushed a button on the elevator. “I want to talk. But first, there are tests to be run.”

PART FOUR

39. Initial Findings

Later that afternoon, Hatch was in his office talking to Quentin when Dr. Parker knocked on his door.

“Come in,” he said gruffly.

She opened the door. “Good evening, Dr. Hatch. Quentin.”

“Quentin was just leaving,” Hatch said.

Quentin immediately stood. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

He walked out of the office and Hatch motioned to the same chair Quentin had occupied. “Take a seat.” Before she could speak Hatch asked, “How’s our boy?”

“I’ve never seen anyone like him.”

“Explain.”

“I’ve confirmed your initial findings. His el-waves are extremely high. Except they’ve grown since your first encounter.”

“So he *is* becoming more powerful,” Hatch said.

“So it would appear. But even more curious is that he seems to handle electricity differently than the others.”

Hatch slightly leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

“His electricity seems to be circulating within his body, either through his bone marrow or central nervous system, which may account for some rather surprising phenomena. I administered a mild shock to him to see how he’d respond and his el-waves actually increased by one percent. I was so intrigued by this result that I upped the power to nearly five hundred joules.

At that level I thought he'd probably jump out of his seat, but instead he just sat there. His body told a different story, however. His el-waves spiked fifty percent, then dropped and maintained at an increased seventeen percent and held there until the end of our examination. He still might be elevated."

Hatch leaned forward in his chair. "You're saying he can absorb electricity from other sources?"

"It would appear so."

"Like Nichelle?"

"Except that Nichelle doesn't retain power; she's simply a conduit to its dissemination. Vey seems to capture it."

Hatch rubbed his chin in fascination. "How is hoarding all that electricity affecting his health?"

"If it's hurting him, it's not manifesting. He's perfectly healthy. With the exception of his Tourette's syndrome."

"He has Tourette's?"

"Yes. That's why he has the facial tics."

"I thought he was just anxious." Hatch rubbed his palms together the way he always did when he was excited. "Could his Tourette's have something to do with why he's different than the other children?"

"I don't know. We don't even know enough about Tourette's to know what causes it. We know it's a neurological disorder, but not a whole lot more than that."

"But it's possible?"

"It's possible."

“I want this information kept in strictest confidentiality.”

“Of course. All research is confidential.”

“I don’t even want your assistants to know. This is between you and me.”

“Very well.”

“If he’ll cooperate, Mr. Vey could be the model of the Glows 2.0.”

“And if he won’t?”

“Then we’ll have to fix that. How was his attitude?”

“He was quite defiant.”

“Of that I’m sure. But there’s one thing I’m equally certain of.”

“What’s that?”

“The boy loves his mother.”

40. A Talk

The guards all looked the

same to me. They were all nearly the same height and build and wore the same uniform: a black beret, dark glasses, and black jumpsuits that appeared to have been made from a rubberized material. They all had communication radios hanging from their ears and jaws and they carried an array of weapons on a utility belt—a knife, a canister of Mace, two different types of revolvers, resin handcuffs, a smoke grenade, a concussion grenade, and a long wooden truncheon.

I was sitting on the floor looking through a shelf of books when I heard the lock slide, then the door open. I was ticking but I didn't care.

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Vey,” a guard said politely. “But Dr. Hatch is ready to meet with you.”

I thought he sounded unusually polite for a prison guard. Of course prisoners aren't usually given rooms with a plasma TV with surround sound audio, and Monet prints on the wall. At first glance, someone might think it's more of a luxury suite than a prison, but if there's no doorknob on the inside, you're still a prisoner.

“All right.” I stood as the door opened fully. There was a second guard standing a few feet behind him in the hall. The second guard didn't say a word. I noticed that they both had their hands on their Mace. I guessed they had been ordered to be pleasant.

“This way, sir,” the guard said. It was odd being called “sir” by someone who was easily twice my age. We took the elevator down one level to the second floor.

They led me down a marble-floored corridor to the end of the hall and into a large reception area, where a secretary sat at a large wooden desk with several monitors. Directly behind her was a glass wall, partially obstructing

another door. In front of the receptionist desk was another guard sitting behind a tall, circular podium with a Plexiglas shield.

The receptionist, a thin woman about my mother's age and wearing narrow reading glasses, looked up as we entered.

"We have Michael Vey," the first guard said, though it was evident she was expecting us.

"I'll inform Dr. Hatch," she said. She pushed a button, then spoke into her phone. She nodded, then hung up the phone and pushed a button beneath her desk. There was a loud buzz and the door slid open. "Dr. Hatch would like you to go on in."

The second guard motioned for me to go first so I walked ahead of them through the open door. I stepped inside while they stopped at the door's threshold. I was ticking like crazy.

Hatch's office reminded me of the ones I had seen on the TV lawyer shows, with bronze statues and busts and cases of books I wondered if anyone ever read. Television screens took up an entire wall. Hatch was sitting at his desk. He wasn't wearing his sunglasses.

Nichelle sat in a chair at the side of the room. I didn't look at her. I couldn't stand her.

Hatch motioned to a leather chair in front of his desk. "Hello, Michael," he said. "Please, take a seat."

I walked up to the chair and sat down, looking around the office.

On the wall behind Hatch was a picture of Dr. Hatch shaking hands with the president of the United States. He noticed that I was looking at the picture.

"It's not hard to get to the President," Hatch said. "If you have money."

"Where's my mother?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed into thin slits. “To the point. I like that. After all, that’s why you made this futile little trip, isn’t it?”

“Where are you keeping my mother?”

“We’ll get to that. But first, there’s something you need to understand. More important than where *she* is, is where *you* are. And who you are.” His voice dropped. “Do you even know?”

“Of course I know who I am.”

“Yes, I know you think you do. But you don’t really know.” His gaze softened. “Who are you? You’re a victim, Michael. A victim of your environment. You have been brainwashed, your thoughts contaminated by the human Petri dish your mind has been cultured in. “For instance, you’ve been told that all men are created equal, but anyone who isn’t blind or ignorant can see that that just isn’t true. Some are rich, some are poor. Some are smart and some are fools. No, no one is born equal. Especially you. “You’re not even equal to the other electric children. You handle electricity in a different way. And you seem to be getting more powerful. I compared your el-waves from now to when I first met you in Idaho. They’ve risen. It’s very impressive.” He leaned forward. “Do you know what we do here, Michael?”

“Kill babies and kidnap teenagers?”

He leaned back with a dark grin. “We’ll get to that,” Hatch said.

“But let me first explain to you what it is that we’re really doing.”

“I know what you’re really doing,” I said. “You’re trying to cover your tracks because your machine failed.”

Hatch chuckled. “What an interesting take you have on this.

That’s the one thing I’ve learned about working with youth—if you think you know what they’re thinking, you’re mistaken.” He straightened his tie.

“You’re right, you know, at least partially. It is about the machine. The MEI we call it. The MEI may have been a failure as an imaging device, but it led to the discovery of something more important. Much more important.

“If you think about it, Michael, there’s a marvelous fate to all this. Many of the world’s greatest discoveries are results of accidents. The MEI was one of those happy accidents. We set out to take pictures of the human body and instead we improved the human body. We invented superhumans. We invented the electric children.

“We’ve spent the last dozen years tracking them down. There were seventeen of you who survived. Seventeen very special children. Sadly, there are only thirteen of you left—four of you died before the age of seven.”

“Died of what?”

“Cancer. No doubt attributable to the excessive electricity coursing through your cells. We can’t be certain, of course, but there’s a chance that unless we find a cure for your condition, that may be all of your fates.”

I sat back in my chair. I had never considered that what I had was a disease.

“But I digress. I was saying that we had found all of the survivors except two: you and Miss Ridley. Miss Ridley was adopted out-of-state and you know how inefficient government bureaucracy is. Her records got lost in the process. And you, well, we tracked you for a while, all throughout California.

“You don’t know it but we’ve been more a part of your life than you realize. If you look through your family picture album, say on that trip you took to Disneyland when you were seven, you’re likely to find a picture of one of our agents in the background. Then, right after your father’s death, your mother pulled a fast one and disappeared. We lost you.

“Actually, it’s quite impressive how she eluded us, seeing that you didn’t even know you were being followed. So we set some traps and hoped that

one of you would someday come looking for us. And you did. Actually, it was Miss Ridley who did. But we never dreamed that we'd be so fortunate that she'd lead us to you. In this matter, fate was truly generous."

Fate sucks, I thought. "What do you want from us?"

Hatch stood and walked around to the front of his desk, leaning back against it. "We're scientists, Michael. We want what all scientists want. Truth. The truth about you. The truth about how you do what you do. We want to know why you lived when so many others died."

"No matter what you call yourself, you're just a bunch of murderers," I said.

"So much anger in you, Michael," Hatch said coolly. "But boys in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, should they?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play stupid, Michael. We know all about it."

I looked at him blankly. "About what?"

"Are you telling me that you really don't know why you left California?"

The way he asked the question frightened me. "We left because my mother was trying to protect me."

He laughed. "Protect you from what?"

I couldn't answer. He walked closer to my chair. "So you really don't know." Hatch rubbed his chin. "I think, deep inside, you do. You must. No child, not even an eight-year-old, could forget something that traumatic. Your mother wasn't protecting you, Michael. She was protecting others from you." His eyes leveled on me in a piercing gaze. I was ticking like crazy, both blinking and gulping.

Hatch leaned back against his desk. “I knew your father. I knew him well. Maybe even better than you did.”

My chest constricted.

“Do you even know where your father worked?” Hatch asked.

“He worked at a hospital,” I blurted out angrily.

Hatch just looked at me for a moment, then the corners of his mouth rose in a subtle smile. “Good. So your mother didn’t hide everything from you. He did indeed work at a hospital. Your father was the head of radiology at Pasadena General.” Hatch slightly leaned forward. “He helped us test the MEI.”

His words hit me like a bucket of ice water. “No!” I shouted. “He wouldn’t do that. He was a good man.”

Hatch nodded. “You’re right, he was a good man. He was a visionary. And, like me, he never intended to hurt anyone. He wanted to advance science and save lives. He wanted to make the world a better place.” Hatch’s voice fell. “Unfortunately, he never got that chance.” Hatch exhaled slowly. “I know what happened to your father, Michael.” Hatch turned around and lifted a folder from his desk, extracting from it a single paper. “I’ve been saving this for some time now, haven’t I, Nichelle?”

I had forgotten that she was in the room. “Yes, sir,” Nichelle said. “Years.”

Hatch held up a paper with a gold border around it. “Michael, have you ever seen a death certificate?”

I shook my head.

“I didn’t think so.” He turned the paper back around. “Let me read the important parts. State of California, County of Los Angeles . . . Carl T. Vey died at 7:56 P.M. in Los Angeles County on the fifth day of October, 2006 . . . Cause of death: Cardiac arrest from an electric shock.” He set down the

paper. “It’s about time you owned up to the truth about your father’s death.” His eyes turned dark. “You stopped your father’s heart.”

At that moment, I had a flashback. I was sitting on my father’s lap. My father was grasping his chest, his eyes wide and panicked.

Then flashing red and blue lights illuminated our kitchen drapes, and sirens wailed in chorus with my mother crying. It was true. That’s what my mother was hiding from me. I had killed my own father.

Darkness filled my heart and mind.

“I was barely eight!” I shouted. “I didn’t know how to control my electricity.”

Hatch just stared at me. “Isn’t that interesting. We wanted to save lives, so we created a machine that could do that. Like you, we didn’t know better. Yet you condemn us—” His voice rose and he pointed at me. “How dare you call me, or your father, a murderer. You’re no different than us, not one iota.” He walked behind his desk and sat down. He looked calmer and his voice was gentle again. “But you can atone for this, Michael. Just as we are trying to atone for our mistake. We’re trying to do the right thing.”

“That’s why you’re torturing Taylor?”

The loud screech went through my head and I fell forward, grabbing my temples. “Aaah.”

Hatch spun around to Nichelle. “Stop it!”

The pain stopped.

“Get her out of here,” I said.

“I can’t do that,” Hatch said. “I don’t fully trust you yet.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“You’re still brainwashed from the outside world. Until you see clearly, I can only trust you to behave like a human.”

“I just want my mother.”

“Of course you do. Which, of course, is precisely why we took her. And whether you see her again depends entirely upon you. If you comply with my instructions, your mother will be set free.

We’ll fly her here to see you, joyful reunion and all that. If not,” his expression fell. “If not, sadly, I cannot guarantee her safety. Even if I wanted to.”

I looked at him quietly. “What are your ‘instructions’?”

“Simple, really. Let’s call them demonstrations of loyalty.”

“What kind of demonstrations?”

“I trust you remember Clyde. You met him in the parking lot and you spoke with him in the jail, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“Clyde was, is, what we call a GP. It’s a nickname we give our human guinea pigs.”

I suddenly understood why Clyde had reacted with such fear and hostility toward me.

“GPs are inconsequential—the coffee grounds of humanity. They are America’s untouchables, criminals and losers, none of them worth the carbon their bodies are made of. So, from time to time, we use them for the advancement of our scientific pursuits.”

What he was telling me horrified me. “Where do you get them?”

I asked.

“From all over. Sometimes we pull them off the streets or from homeless shelters. Sometimes we find them engaged in some kind of criminal activity. In fact we brought in two new ones just today. Would you like to meet them?”

“No,” I said.

“These, I think you will.” He pushed a button on his desk. “Bring GPs Seven Sixty-Four and Seven Sixty-Five to my office immediately.”

I looked at him incredulously. “You kidnap people and use them for experiments?”

“Well, the word *people* might be a bit strong but the rest of what you said is accurate.” He looked at me with a grim smile. “We’re doing them a favor, really. Out in society they would only selfdestruct. Most of them already had. This way we preserve their lives a little longer, improve their standard of living, and give meaning to their pathetic existences. They are actually contributing to society instead of just staining it.”

A moment later one of the guards opened Hatch’s door. “They’re here, sir.”

“Bring them in.”

The guard signaled to someone outside the door and two other guards brought in the shackled GPs. I couldn’t believe what I saw.

Jack and Wade. They looked terrified, especially Wade, who was trembling so hard his chains were rattling. They were both barefoot and dressed in Day-Glo orange jumpsuits. In addition to the shackles and chains on their legs and wrists they had large plastic and stainless steel collars fastened around their necks. The collars had green flashing lights. The sight of them bound made me sick to my stomach.

“I’m sorry,” I said to them, shaking my head. “I’m so sorry.”

Jack and Wade just looked at me with fearful eyes. I didn't understand why they didn't say anything.

I turned back to Hatch. "What are those things around their necks?" I asked angrily.

"Simple devices to ensure they don't decide to leave us," Hatch said. "It's based on the invisible fence theory." He looked at me. "Are you familiar with that?"

"No."

"That's right, you had neither a dog nor a yard. Some dog owners put special electric shock collars on their pets that will administer a mild shock to their dog when it crosses an invisible boundary. It trains the dog to not leave the yard. These collars your associates are sporting operate on the same principle. If your friends leave this building they will be shocked.

"The collar also monitors their vocal cords. If they attempt to shout or even speak they will be shocked. But I'm afraid it's a bit more potent than that painful little wake-up call a dog gets. The charge these collars generate is quite a bit more lively and will completely incapacitate them." His eyes moved back and forth between Jack and Wade. "Maybe even kill them."

"You need to let them go," I said. "They're not part of this."

"You're quite wrong about that, Michael. The moment they chose to help you they became a part of this." His voice rose and he looked at Jack and Wade with disdain. "The moment they violated our academy they became a part of this."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"The same thing we do with all our GPs—whatever furthers our cause." He looked at the guard. "Take them back to their cells."

“You heard him,” the guard said to Jack and Wade. They turned and shuffled out of the room.

“How many prisoners do you have here?” I asked.

“Only a few dozen. Our Pasadena facility is quite small compared to the others. In fact, now that we have you and Miss Ridley, we’ll be shutting down this facility and moving elsewhere. Someplace where we have a little more . . . flexibility.”

“Flexibility to do what?”

He looked at me gravely. “I’m a scientist, Michael. And I have a vision. I’ve been trying to create the perfect Glow. And we’re getting close. You and Miss Ridley are very much a part of my plans.

“We’ve tested thousands of DNA samples. We’ve run thousands of blood tests, searching for the one link that all you survivors have in common. We’ve even been testing diets and nutritional supplements to gauge how eating affects your powers. We’ve discovered that with a nonsugar diet high in minerals and potassium we can actually increase electrical flow.

“But you, Michael, are something else. Even without our help, you’ve been increasing your electrical capacity nearly two percent a day. That means you’re doubling in power just about every two months. In a year you may be the most powerful Glow of all—if your electricity doesn’t kill you first.”

“What do you mean, ‘kill me first’?”

“Like I told you before, we’ve already lost four of you to cancer. That’s why I sent you in for the checkup. You’re going to need our help. The doctors out there can’t help you; they’ve never seen anyone like you before. There are no medical books on your condition. If you want to live to manhood, you had better stay close to us.”

His words filled me with even greater fear. What had they found in my exam? Was I really dying? It was too big to think about and I pushed it from

my mind. “Why did you take my mother instead of me?”

“Trust me, your mother would rather it had been her than you. Mothers are like that. Actually we tried to take you both, but your chubby friend ruined that when he showed up with all those people around. We only had time to take one of you and, frankly, better her than you.”

“But I’m the one with the power.”

“Yes, but as you well know, power, undirected, is worthless—an engine without wheels. It’s the old saying, isn’t it? You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink. Unless you happen to have your horse’s mother locked away in a cage somewhere. Having collateral will make you much more . . . malleable.

“Take your fellow Glow, Tanner. He has an amazing power. He can bring down an airplane from the ground. The first time I told him to crash a 747 he refused. Until we let him see his little brother getting nearly electrocuted by one of your peers. It only took ten minutes of his screams before he was quite eager to help out.

“You know how it goes, Michael. The first time you resist. The second time you relent. The third time you volunteer. It’s that easy.

Today, I tell Tanner to bring down a commercial flight and he says, ‘which plane?’” He looked into my eyes. “We’re creating an army, Michael. And you are a natural leader. You would make a very good general.”

“An army to fight who?”

“Whomever we need to fight. Whoever stands in our way as we reach for our destiny. Just think of the powers at our disposal. Just consider Tanner. He can bring down a jet airliner without a bomb, missile, or security risk. There’s no tracking, there’s no preventing. Sudden and complete mechanical failure and the plane drops out of the sky. Do you have any idea what his talent is worth? Terrorists would pay tens of millions. Governments would pay hundreds of millions. Or billions. Especially if that

plane were carrying a nuclear weapon—or the president of the United States.

“And that’s just one of many of your graduating class’s talents. We just need more of you. A lot more of you.”

“What makes you think anyone will follow you?”

“They will and they do. Most of them have, at least. It’s amazing what you can do to a young mind before the rest of the world contaminates it. It’s you older kids, the brainwashed, who are the problem. Like poor, misguided Miss Ridley. I offered her the world and she spat it back in my face.”

“Taylor’s a good person,” I said, my right eye twitching.

“That depends entirely on what you mean by ‘good.’ If, by ‘good’ you mean shortsighted, ungrateful, and small-minded, then you’re right.”

He stood and his expression relaxed. “That’s enough for today. I’m going to let you stay in one of the guest suites tonight. You’ll be much more comfortable there. Unfortunately, for now, you will still be assigned a guard. Don’t get me wrong, Michael. I trust you. I really do. I just don’t trust the world you come from. Too much of it is still in your head. But we’ll work on it. “In the meantime, if you have any seditious schemes, remember, your mother will pay severely for your mistakes. You shock someone, she’ll be shocked twice. You hurt someone, well, you get the picture. It’s beautifully ironic. For centuries the sins of the parents have been answered on the heads of their children. Now the opposite is true.”

He walked to the door. “It’s time for you to go.”

I stood and walked to the door, followed a few yards back by Nichelle.

“I’m giving you a few days to consider your predicament. I urge you to seriously do so. Lives are at stake here. You’ve already killed your father. Will you kill your mother too?”

His words cut like razor blades.

“And then there are your friends. If you choose to disregard my offer, Jack and Wade will be the first to go. Then Ostin and finally Taylor. It’s your call. They’re all counting on you to do the right thing. If you don’t, they’ll disappear one by one. Think carefully now. Are you going to lose a few of them before you change your mind? Or will you do the right thing the first time?”

“As you grow older, Michael, you’ll learn an important lesson—that most people spend their entire lives wishing for a second chance to do what they should have done right the first time. Don’t be like them, Michael.” He smiled at me, placing his hand on my shoulder, which made me feel sick inside. “I believe in you. I know you think you’re doing the right thing by resisting, but it’s because your point of view is skewed. All you have to do is walk across the aisle and see it from our side. And as your reward, I’m offering you everything you’ve dreamed of. You’ll be the head of the electric children. You’ll have a life a rock star would envy. And you’ll have your Taylor.” He smiled. “Yes, I know how you feel about Taylor. And she’ll be all yours. Your little friend, Ostin, will be allowed to go home to his mommy and daddy. And your mother will be set free. And some day you’ll have the adoration of millions. All around the world, children will want to be you. “Remember, history is made by those willing to tear up the last mapmaker’s map. Make history, Michael. You have two days to make up your mind. I dare say that these are the two most important days of your life. I know your heart may not entirely be in it at first; I don’t expect it to be. There’s too much brainwashing in there. I just want to see that you’re willing to commit. That’s all I ask. And for that simple commitment I offer you the world.” He turned and nodded to the guard. “Have a good night, Michael.”

“Let’s go,” a guard said to me.

Nichelle and the guards took me to a suite on the third floor. I sat on the bed and the door locked behind me. My head was spinning like a top. My entire world had been turned upside down.

For the next two days I was left alone in my room. Under different circumstances I would have thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

The suite had a refrigerator and cabinet that were full of drinks and candies from all around the world. I tried some Japanese candy, Chocoballs and Hi-Chews, which were some of the best candy I'd ever eaten. Four meals were brought in daily, on plates that looked like my mom's best china. There were menus for entertainment as well as food. The first day an Asian woman came to my room and offered me a massage, which I didn't accept.

There were shelves of video games. The newest on the market, some not yet on the market, and some I'd only dreamed of. I thought of how excited Ostin would be to see them. I only wished that he were there to play them with me.

In spite of all the distractions, all I could think about was my impending decision. What did Hatch mean by "demonstrations of loyalty"? What would he require of me? Something told me that his "simple commitment" was anything but simple.

My second night, as I lay in bed, I made my decision. If they would let my mother and my friends go, I would stay. There was no other choice to be made.

41. Ostin's Plan

Ostin didn't sleep the first night. His stomach was growling and he was homesick. Taylor came and sat by him. "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"No."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yeah."

"Me too." She put her arm around him. "I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry that I wasn't very nice to you back in Idaho."

"I thought you were nice. Except at that party when you kept threatening to reboot me."

Taylor looked down. "Maddie's party. That seems like a million years ago. It's funny how the things that were so important back then don't matter anymore. Maybe Hatch is right: we have been brainwashed."

"Hatch isn't right," Ostin said. "Hatch is a devil. It's like my mother always says, 'the devil will tell a thousand truths to sell one lie.'"

Taylor slowly nodded. "Want to know something?"

Ostin looked at her. "What?"

"I was jealous of you."

"You were jealous of me?" he said.

Taylor scratched her head. "You're so smart. I've always wished that I were that smart."

"But you get good grades."

“You don’t really have to be smart to get good grades. Just good at doing what they tell you to do.”

Ostin slowly shook his head. “How could you be jealous of me? You have everything. You’re like the most popular girl in the universe. Everyone loves you.”

“Not everyone. Being popular isn’t always easy. You make enemies. And they’re usually people who pretend to be your friend. Frenemies.”

“I never thought of that.”

“So maybe I do know something you don’t.” She sighed. “It all just seems so stupid now. What am I going to wear to Jessica’s party, what if Megan wears the same thing, who is Paul going to ask to the prom? It’s all so meaningless.”

Ostin put his head down. “I wish those were still our problems.”

Taylor said, “Me too. What do you think they’re going to do to Michael?”

“They’ll try to break him.”

“It’s my fault he’s here.”

“No, it’s not. I mean, he would have come after you, but he would have come anyway. They have his mother. He’s got a great mother.”

He touched her arm. “It’s not your fault.”

She smiled sadly. “Thanks.”

“Besides, even if it was, we’re a club, right? All for one and one for all.”

“Yeah. I’d just rather be the one for all instead of the all for one.”

Ostin sat back and breathed out heavily. “You know, there’s something about all this I don’t understand. Why have they kept these kids here for so

long?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ian, Abigail, McKenna. They clearly aren’t going to convert. So why don’t they just”—he hesitated—“you know, get rid of them?”

“I don’t know.”

Suddenly Ostin’s eyes widened. “The only reason you keep something around is because it’s valuable. That’s it.”

“What?”

“If they’re valuable, they’ll protect them.” His whole face animated. “I have an idea how to get out of here. But I’ll need everyone’s help.”

Taylor’s eyes lit with hope. “Let’s go talk to them.”

42. The Attempt

In the darkness of the cell, Ian looked like a ghost, the pale glow of his skin rising a half foot taller than Ostin. He stood with his arms crossed at his chest, staring down at Ostin. “That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard.”

“Keep your voice down,” Ostin said. “They’ll hear us.”

“You don’t tell me what to do. In here, I’m in charge.”

“You’re not in charge of me.”

“Yes, I am. This is my turf.”

“No, you’re not my boss.”

“Are you dissing me?”

“I’ll diss you if I want. I’m not afraid of you, bat boy.”

Ian got in Ostin’s face. “What did you call me?”

“You two knock it off,” Taylor said. “He was just trying to help.”

“Keep out of it,” McKenna said.

There was an audible whirr as three of the five video cameras panned across the room.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Taylor said. “I’ll fry your brain.”

“Try it,” McKenna said, her skin beginning to brighten. “I’ll cook you.”

“You’ll never get a chance, lightbulb.”

“Will you all stop it?” Abigail said. “It’s bad enough we have them hating us.”

Ian growled, “So, chunky soup here is dissing me for being blind?”

“Chunky soup?” Ostin said, “Take it back.”

Ian uncrossed his arms. “Make me.”

“I will.”

“I’d like to see you try, doughboy. The only exercise you get is unwrapping Twinkies. I’ll roll you out like pizza dough.”

“You’re going to pay for that.”

“Ooh, scary,” Ian said.

Ostin rushed at him and knocked him over by the door. Ian groaned as he hit the ground.

“What the . . . McKenna!” Ian shouted. “Taylor’s doing something to me. She’s messing with my brain.”

A harsh voice came over the speaker system. “Occupants of cell B, stop what you’re doing, immediately.”

Ian began screaming. “Abi, McKenna, stop the new girl! Stop her.”

“That does it,” McKenna said. “You’re going to pay.”

“Bring it on, Day-Glo,” Taylor said. “I can take both of you.”

The girls surrounded Taylor. Ian and Ostin were locked in combat when the door clicked and opened. Two guards ran into the room.

“Now!” Ostin said.

McKenna suddenly burst into a brilliant light, temporarily blinding the guards. Taylor turned and focused on the two men as Ian charged at them, knocking them both over. Abigail and McKenna quickly jumped on the

men, pulling their Mace from their belts and spraying them in the face with it. Taylor kept rebooting them over and over and the men flailed about confused and gasping from the Mace.

“Ostin,” Ian said, “come help me.” They rolled the first guard over and handcuffed his hands behind his back, then dragged him inside; next they handcuffed and dragged in the second one and stuffed both of their mouths with toilet paper. Ostin pulled their magnetic keys from their pockets.

“Got the keys?” Ian asked.

Ostin held them up. “Got ’em.”

“Let’s go,” Ian said. “Give us some light, McKenna.”

“On it.”

The four of them followed Ian out into the hallway, pulling the cell door shut behind them.

“Which way?” Ostin asked.

“The guards came from this direction,” Ian said.

“How can you tell?” Taylor asked.

“I’m an electric hound dog,” Ian said. “People leave electronic imprints when they move.”

They ran down the hall toward a service elevator. “Oh, oh,” Ian said.

“They’re coming.” Suddenly an alarm went off.

“Monkey butts,” Ostin said.

“Here, give me the key.” Ian opened the elevator and they all rushed in.

“Go to the second floor. That’s the administration level. They won’t expect that.”

Taylor hit the button. The door shut and the elevator began to move. The elevator hit the second floor and paused but the door didn't open. Suddenly it began moving up again.

"What's it doing?" Abigail asked.

"I don't think we're controlling it anymore," Ostin said.

The elevator climbed all the way to the fourth floor and froze.

Ian's head dropped. "We're dead."

The door opened. There were at least fifteen guards standing in front of them with guns drawn. "On your knees!" one shouted. "And put your hands behind your head."

"Taylor?" Ostin asked.

Taylor squinted. "There's too many of them."

Ian sighed and knelt down. The rest followed.

"You are smart," Ian said to Ostin. "That's the closest to freedom anyone here has ever got."

Ostin sighed. "Close only counts in horseshoes and nuclear weapons."

43. Relocation

On the second floor Hatch had been watching the escape attempt unfold on the screens in front of him. “Well done, Mr. Welch,” he said. “Split them up. Put the human boy with the GPs.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

As he pushed down on the intercom button a voice came over his phone. “Your call, sir.”

“Thank you.” He pushed the button again. “This is Hatch.”

The British voice sounded annoyed. “What do you need?”

“The BA money has made it into all the accounts. We’re filtering it through Switzerland and the Cayman Islands. Our EC has been withdrawn from Dubai and relocated to our Italian compound. We’re ready to commence evacuation of the Pasadena facility.”

“What is the status of the Vey boy?”

“I’ve given him two days to pick a side. He’s got eighteen hours left.”

“And what side will he pick?” The voice was monotone but still managed to convey the intended threat.

“He’ll be with us. He has too much to lose.”

“I hope you’re right. About the relocation, the board is rightfully concerned that you follow protocol. We want no attention drawn to our move.”

“Of course. We’ll evacuate the children first, then we’ll drug and transport the GPs to our Lima facility. Our 727 will be sufficient for that. We’ll destroy all records and quietly renovate the building. We already have the city building permits for renovation and our leasing company has legitimate tenants ready to occupy the facility—a private school.”

“Very well. Then I’ll see you in Rome in a few months.”

“I look forward to it. After the last month, it will be nice to relax a few days.”

“Just don’t plan on too much of it. We’re ready to launch phase two.”

44. The Contract and a “Simple” Demonstration of Loyalty”

It was late afternoon of my third day in captivity when two guards came to my room. I was lying on my bed playing a video game when the door opened and they stepped inside, followed by Nichelle. I hated seeing her. Actually, I hated her. She always made me tic.

“Time to go,” the tallest guard said, not as politely as the last time they’d come for me.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Dr. Hatch has requested your presence.”

“Let me get my shoes on.” I put on my shoes, then walked out of my room with one guard in front and one in back with Nichelle walking at the rear guard’s side. They walked right past Hatch’s secretary and into his office. Hatch was at his desk. He stood as I entered.

“How are you, Michael?” he asked.

“Tired,” I said.

“I would imagine. You’ve had enough on your mind to cause anyone insomnia.” He turned to the guards. “You may go.”

“Yes, sir,” the guards said in unison.

To my surprise he said to Nichelle, “You too.”

Nichelle looked at me. “Just try something,” she said.

“Nichelle, that’s really not necessary.”

She glared at me before following the guards out of the room.

Hatch shook his head. “Sorry about that. What Nichelle lacks in tact she makes up for in unpleasantness.” His expression hardened. “So, down to business. Have you come to a decision?”

My tics were acting up and I tried not to blink but couldn’t help it. “Yes, sir.”

“And that is?”

“If you’ll free my mother and my friends, I’ll join you.”

He just stared at me until the silence became uncomfortable.

“You know I can’t release Taylor,” he finally said. “She’s too dangerous. She knows too much.”

“But that was our deal.”

“No, you’ll recall that our deal was that I’m giving her to you. A much better scenario, I’d say.”

I just looked at him. That *was* what he’d said.

“I’m not trying to be difficult, Michael. But Taylor brought this on herself—and you. She’ll have to live with the consequences. But, with you joining us, I think she’ll come around and before too long she’ll join us back in the house. And, she’ll be yours.”

I couldn’t help but wonder how he planned to ensure that.

“But, of course, your mother will be set free immediately, as will Ostin and Jack. We’ll fuel up Jack’s car, give him some traveling money, and he can drive back home.”

“What proof do I have of that?”

“What proof would you have? Ostin can call you as soon as they’re on the road. And we’ll let you talk to your mother.” He leaned forward, extending

his hand. “Do we have an agreement?”

I looked down again for a moment, then stepped forward and took his hand. “Yes, sir.” We shook. Then he sat back in his chair.

“Very well.” He pushed a piece of paper toward me. “I’d like you to sign this document, to convey your resolve.”

I leaned over the desk and looked at the form.

I, Michael Vey, do hereby enroll and subscribe as a full member of the Elgen Academy and promise to do whatever is required of me to promote and advance the academy’s work, mission, and objectives as long as my services are required.

X _____

I thought it was peculiar that he wanted me to sign something. It’s not as if anything signed by a fifteen-year-old would be legally binding.

“You may use my pen.” Hatch held out to me a beautiful, goldplated pen inset with rubies. I read the statement again, then signed beneath it. I pushed the document back to him with the pen.

“Keep the pen,” he said. “A memento of a very special occasion.”

He leaned back and examined the document.

“I, Michael Vey, hereby enroll and subscribe as a full member of the Elgen Academy and I promise to do whatever is required of me to promote and advance the academy’s work, mission, and objectives as long as my services are required.’ That’s quite a commitment you’ve just made.”

He set it back down and looked into my eyes. “Quite a promise. Unfortunately, promises are broken all the time. Like you, I need some proof. I need to see what’s behind your commitment.”

“What proof would you have?” I asked, using his words back at him.

“Simple. We’re going to take a little test. Fortunately, unlike Mr. Poulsen’s biology class, this is one you don’t have to study for.” He stood and walked around his desk. “This way, please.”

I followed him out of his office. The guards saluted him, then fell back to my side, Nichelle trailing behind all of us. My mind was reeling. What kind of test would this be?

We went to the service elevator near the back of the building and all five of us entered. One of the guards pushed the button for D. I frowned. We were going back down to the level where I had found Taylor. The elevator stopped and the door opened. Hatch stepped out and I followed him. We walked down the hall to the end of the corridor, past the cell with Ian and the girls. We turned left, then left again, and walked on to a metal door at the end of the hall. There was another guard standing by the door and he pulled open the door as we approached, exposing a long, cavernous room with bare white walls. I followed Hatch inside.

In the center of the room was a chair bolted to the floor with a man in an orange GP jumpsuit sitting in it. The man’s arms and legs were clamped to the chair by metal straps, like an electric chair, and a metal brace circled around his neck below his electric vocal collar, holding him erect. He couldn’t move if he wanted to. The man in the chair had a hood over his head that fell to his chin.

“So, Michael, you’ve told me that you’re now one of us and you’ve promised, as a full member of the academy, to do whatever is required to promote and advance the cause of our revolution. Here’s your opportunity to show me that you mean what you say.” He gestured toward the man. “Here’s your test.”

I looked at the man, then back at Hatch. “I don’t understand. What’s my test?”

Hatch walked up to the bound man and pulled off his hood. The man in the chair was not a man at all—it was Wade. “Simple, Michael. Electrocute him.”

I looked at Wade as his eyes grew wide with fright. Suddenly he screamed out, "Please, no!" His outburst was followed by a scream of pain as blue-yellow electricity arced from his collar. Hatch shook his head in disgust. "Unless he decides to do it to himself."

I stared at Hatch, blinking like crazy. "How does killing Wade advance the work of the academy?"

"That is not yours to question," he said. "You committed to obey, now do as you're told. As you promised."

"I won't do it," I said.

Hatch sighed. "Michael, let me explain this better," he said, motioning to a large screen that hung down from the corner of the room like a stalactite. "Clark, turn on the monitor please. Set it to channel 788." The guard pushed several buttons and the monitor lit up.

Hatch took the remote from the guard and turned to me. "For your amusement, we'll call this the Mommy Channel."

An image materialized on the screen of a frail, beaten-looking woman, huddled in the corner of a cell. It took me a moment to recognize who it was. My heart raced.

"Mom!"

She looked up at the screen as if she could hear me.

"Mom, it's me, Michael!" I shouted.

"She can't hear you," Hatch said. "Or see you." He stepped closer to Wade, lightly jostling the remote in his hand. "You have a choice, Michael. I was very clear about that choice. It's time you learned this important life lesson: you do as you promise or those you love suffer."

“See the silver box on the far end of the cell? It is connected to this remote in my hand.” He pushed a button on the remote and a light on the silver box began blinking. “I have just armed the capacitor. If I push this button right here, it will release about a thousand amps into the cage. Enough to kill your mother.” He looked into my eyes, weighing the effect his words had on me. “Or maybe not. It might just prove remarkably painful. As you know, the human body can be so unpredictable. Whether we discover its lethality is up to you. So, right now, you can punish GP Seven Sixty-Five or punish your mother. It’s your choice.”

I stood there looking at the screen, my body trembling. Through the corner of my eye I could see Wade shaking as well. “It’s not my choice,” I said. “It’s not my choice to decide who lives or dies.”

“It might not be a fair choice, but it most certainly is your choice.”

I just stood there.

“Michael,” Hatch said gently, “You said you were with us. You signed a binding document that confirmed your commitment. Were you lying to me?”

“You didn’t say I’d have to kill someone.”

“No, I didn’t. In fact, I wasn’t specific at all, was I? And that’s the point. I demanded your allegiance, whatever that requires. And right now, this is what your allegiance requires.” He folded his arms at his chest. “Or shall I push the button?”

I looked down at Wade. Sweat was beading on his forehead and his underarms were soaked through all the way down his sides. I walked to his side, then put my hand on his shoulder. He shuddered at my touch.

Hatch nodded. “Good choice, Michael. Now give him everything.

That would be the merciful thing.”

I looked down. Tears were welling up in Wade's eyes. I still stood there, frozen.

After a minute Hatch looked at his watch. "We haven't all day.

You have thirty seconds before I make the choice for you. Who will live? A good, loving mother or a juvenile delinquent who will never amount to beans? What would your mother say?"

Something about what Hatch said resonated through me. I looked back up at the monitor, at my mother lying there alone and scared, then at Hatch, the man who had put her there.

"What would my mother say?" I said. My eyes narrowed. "My mother would say that she'd rather die than see her son become a murderer." I took my hand off Wade, then lunged at Hatch. Pain seared through my entire body, buckling my knees. I fell to the ground screaming.

Hatch took a deep breath to regain his composure. He kicked me, then walked to the door. "Thank you, Nichelle. Buy yourself a new bauble."

"Thank you," she said.

From the doorway Hatch looked back at me. "I'm so disappointed in you, Michael. You are a liar and an oath breaker." He turned to the guards. "Take him to Cell Twenty-Five. Then have Tara report to my office." He looked back at me. "Unlike you, Mr. Vey, I don't break my promises. But I will break you. And here's my promise. You will never disobey me again. By the time I'm done with you, you'll beg for the privilege of electrocuting your own mother." He turned to the guard. "Take him."

My heart filled with fear. When Hatch was gone I asked, "What's Cell Twenty-Five?"

Nichelle smiled. "Terror."

45. Cell 25

Cell 25 was located at the end of the first corridor of the GP prison, the first floor below ground and one floor above level D, where Hatch had taken me for my “test.” Even from the outside the cell looked different than the rest. The door was gray-black and broader than the others with a large, hydraulic latch. There were peculiar hatches and hinges and a panel of flashing lights.

The guards opened the door with a key, pushed me inside, and the thick, metal door sealed the world shut behind me. The room was completely dark except for my own soft glow. There was no sound but my heart pounding in my ears. I wondered what Nichelle had meant by “terror.” I found out soon enough.

It was maybe an hour after they’d thrown me in the cell that I was suddenly filled with fear like I had never felt before. Something evil was crawling around in the cell. Even though I couldn’t see it, I was sure of it. Something frightening beyond words. I was so paralyzed with fear I struggled to inhale the dry, hot air. *Venomous snakes? Spiders? Thousands of spiders?* “What’s in here?” I shouted.

The room was dead space and there was no sound, not even the trace of an echo from my screaming. Trembling, I reached out and felt the cell wall but there was nothing there, just smooth, warm metal. I couldn’t see or hear anything, but somehow I just knew something was in the room with me.

“Let me out of here!” I screamed, pounding on the walls. I screamed until I was hoarse. When I couldn’t stand it anymore, I probed a corner of the cell with my foot. “It’s nothing,” I told myself. “There’s nothing’s here.” I slowly slunk down in the corner, my arms huddled around myself. “There’s nothing here,” I repeated over and over. I tried to force my mind to think of other things but the fear was too powerful. I began screaming again. *Black widow spiders. Crocodiles. No, sharks. Great whites.* “No, that’s impossible,” I told myself. “I’m not in water.” And yet the absurd was somehow believable. What was going on in my head?

Peculiarly, about an hour after my panic had begun, the feelings vanished as suddenly as they had come, as if I'd suddenly woken from a nightmare. Not all my fear was gone, of course, but the extreme aspect of it had vanished.

After a few minutes I slowly stood, venturing out of my corner. I felt my way around the cell. There was no bed or even a mat, just a slick concrete floor and a porcelain toilet in one corner of the room.

I went back to the same corner and sat down again. I wondered how long I would survive.

The next few days (or what I thought were days, since I was quickly losing track of time) passed in pain and discomfort. The cell's temperature was usually high enough that I was covered with my own sweat, then it would abruptly drop until I was shivering with cold.

Food, when I got it, was also served sporadically. The food came to me through a hatch door that did not allow light into the cell, as the door on my side only opened after the outer door was sealed. I guessed that my feeding schedule was irregular to throw off my body's natural sense of timing. The food stunk, literally, and the first time I ate it I spit it out. I don't know what it was, I couldn't see it, but the texture and smell reminded me of canned dog food. I was given no water and as I began to thirst I realized that my only option was to drink it from the toilet, which I'm sure was their intent from the beginning.

In some ways, even worse than the occasional panic attacks, was the sound—a consistent, loud, electronic beep that began shortly after my first panic attack and chirped every thirty seconds without cease. The sound began to occupy my sleep and dreams and eventually became incredibly painful as it filled my every thought. I had read about tortures like this before, like the water torture, where a single drop of water falls consistently on a bound man's head. They say that after a while the tiny drop begins to feel like a sledgehammer. I believed it. After several days of the sound my head felt like it might explode.

What made it even more unbearable was the uncertainty of it all. I was kept in the dark, figuratively as well as literally. Were they ever going to release me? Would it be minutes or days or years? I had no idea. I thought of Hatch's "promise." *You will never disobey me again. By the time I'm done with you, you'll beg for the privilege of electrocuting your own mother.* I wondered if he was right. Could one be so physically and emotionally broken that he no longer cared about anyone or anything except survival? I didn't want to find out.

Intermingled with my terror and pain were thoughts of my mother. On the screen she had looked so small and frail. I doubted that she could have survived the shock if Hatch had followed through with his threat. Had he pushed the button or not? The thought of it filled me with both hate and guilt. I wished that he had just killed me instead. Didn't he say that I was dying anyway?

I realized that the panic attacks I was having seemed to be on a type of schedule and I wondered if it was possible that Hatch and his scientists had actually perfected a process to generate fear.

Thirteen meals had passed. (That's how I kept track of time.) My fear attack had just ended and I lay on the ground, drenched in sweat and trembling. I heard myself mumbling, "I can't do it anymore. You win, I can't do it anymore." I felt the watch on my arm, the one my mother had given me. I couldn't read the words in the dark but I didn't have to. I'm sure Hatch had let me keep the watch to keep my mind on my mother. Nothing Hatch did was by accident and it certainly wasn't out of kindness. I began to cry. "I'm sorry I failed you, Mom."

I had lost weight and it felt as if every cell of my body ached. If they meant to break me, they knew exactly what they were doing.

Of course they did. They were scientists.

As I lay on the ground, I noticed something very peculiar. In the corner of the room there was a dim light. The metal pipe that ran from the wall to the

toilet began to lightly glow, not consistently, but intermittently. It's happening, I thought. I'm losing my mind.

I'm hallucinating. I looked away. A moment later I looked back. The pipe was still glowing, though slightly brighter now. I crawled over to the toilet and cautiously put out my hand to touch it. The moment I touched it, it went dark. Then a feeling came over me that cannot be accurately described to anyone who hasn't felt it. I felt pure peace. It felt as if some power was pulsing through my body, pushing out the fear and hurt and replacing it with perfect tranquility. I felt as comfortable as if I were laying on my own bed at home listening to my music. Even the constant chirp sounded pleasant.

I let go of the pipe and my pain, exhaustion, and fear instantly returned. I quickly grabbed it again. Maybe I was losing my mind, but if holding on to a toilet pipe could make me feel good, I was going to hold on to that pipe.

Then I understood. The cell with Taylor, Ian, Abigail, and McKenna was somewhere on the floor below mine. Taylor had said that Abigail could take away pain. Abigail must be touching a pipe that ran between the two cells, conducting her power to me, much the same way I had shocked Cody Applebaum in school detention. But how would she even know I was here?

She didn't. Ian did. Ian had probably been watching me all along. He knew I was here. Was it possible that he, Abigail, and McKenna were working together to save me? They didn't even know me. Yet it made sense. McKenna could have made the pipe glow to lead me to it. My eyes watered and I began to cry. It was not the first time since I'd been placed in the cell—but the first time that I had cried for something other than pain. For the first time in days I had hope that I might survive.

From that point on, whenever things got bad, I went to the pipe and grasped it and immediately the pain ceased. During the "terror sessions" my invisible friends were always waiting. I deduced that Ian must be able to see when and how they were torturing me. I was filled with gratitude for my unseen friends and I learned that harboring an emotion as powerful as

gratitude has power of its own. My greatest fear was that they might be discovered and moved to a different cell. I knew Hatch and his guards were watching me, so I was discreet in how I held to the pipe. I usually pretended to be throwing up or drinking.

Actually, their discovery was my second-greatest fear. My greatest fear was that my mother was dead.

46. Lack of Trust

I felt as if I'd been in Cell 25 for weeks when I heard the inner tumblings of the lock on the door.

There was a slide of metal and the door opened and I saw the first light since I'd been incarcerated. As usual I was lying on the ground and I instinctively pushed myself way away from the door, covering my face from the harsh light. "Stay away," I mumbled.

Nichelle walked into the cell escorted by two of the guards. "It reeks in here. It smells like the giraffe house at the zoo." She started laughing. "He smells as bad as Zeus." One of the guards laughed.

She took a few more steps toward me and looked down at me.

"Hatch wants you. Get up."

Hatch. His name alone filled me with terror. I rolled over to my knees and elbows and tried to stand but I couldn't.

"I said get up!" she shouted.

"I can't," I replied, my forehead pressed to the ground.

After a moment Nichelle nodded to one of the guards and he walked over to lift me. He stopped before he touched me and looked at Nichelle.

Nichelle squatted down in front of me. "If you shock him, we'll keep you in here for the rest of your short, miserable life. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I won't shock him."

"Why would I believe you? You're a liar."

"Liar or not, I can't stand up."

She looked at me for a moment, then said to the guard, “Help him.”

The guard put his hands under my armpits and easily lifted me.

When I was on my feet he let go of me and I collapsed back to the ground, crying out with pain. Nichelle rolled her eyes. “Carry him.”

The guard lifted me again and this time he put his arm around me, carrying more of my weight than I was, as I staggered down the hall to the elevator. As we walked I sucked in the cool air, breathing it in like water. In spite of my pain, I can’t tell you how luxurious it felt. In the elevator I noticed Nichelle pushed the D button and I silently groaned. Hatch was back in the dungeon. *Another test, I thought. If he asked me again to electrocute Wade would I do it?*

I tried to think of better possibilities. Perhaps I was being reassigned to the dungeon. Maybe with Ian and the two girls. I wanted to see them badly. I wanted to hug them and thank them. The dungeon would be a Caribbean vacation compared to Cell 25.

My hope dissipated as we walked past their cell, back to the room at the end of the hall. Back to block H, the room where Wade had been bound and where I had “failed” my test. The room’s light was on and the door was partially open. The guard carried me inside. There were three chairs in the room and Taylor and Ostin were strapped into two of them. *Please, not them, I thought.*

I don’t know what I looked like. In Cell 25 it was too dark to even see my reflection in the toilet, but, based on Taylor’s reaction, I must have looked pretty awful. She gasped.

“Michael,” she said.

“Oh, buddy,” Ostin said. “What have they done to you?”

“Shut up,” Nichelle said. “Save your pity for yourselves.”

The guard dropped me in a plastic chair and then fastened my hands and feet with plastic ties. A large plastic belt was drawn around my waist and fastened in back. It was overkill. I couldn't have even stood up under my own power. Only my tics seemed strong.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Shut up," Nichelle said. "No talking."

"You're a toad-face," Ostin said.

Nichelle immediately tried to reach him with her powers, forgetting that she had no effect on him. She walked over and smacked him on the head.

"You're fat."

"Yeah, well you're ugly, and I can lose weight."

She sneered and slapped him on the side of the head again.

"Ow," Ostin said.

"Keep your mouth shut, butterball."

About five minutes later Hatch walked into the room. He said to me darkly, "I trust your accommodations were to your satisfaction."

My head felt like it weighed a ton and I just sat there, staring at my feet.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!" he shouted.

It took effort, but I raised my head and looked into his eyes.

Hatch wore his dark glasses and a strange-looking helmet. I turned my head to one side and my neck cracked. I looked back at Hatch, "What did you do to my mother?"

"Twenty-six days in Cell Twenty-Five and still defiant. If I wasn't so disappointed in you I'd be impressed. Be assured that she's paid dearly for

your choices, but she survived the shock, if that's what you're getting at. And I'm pleased. I didn't want to discard my best card yet. Though, as you see, even without her, the deck is stacked in my favor."

He turned and looked at Taylor. "Don't waste your time trying to reboot me, Miss Ridley. You have little enough of it left." He tapped his helmet. "Those electric waves of yours won't make it through this very special helmet your sister helped us create." He smiled at her smugly. "Perhaps you're wondering how we came up with this."

"I don't care," Taylor said.

"You should, it's quite interesting. When I was in my early twenties I did some work for the NSA—the National Security Agency. They're the smart spies, the ones who break codes for the U.S. military. The NSA building in Maryland is completely wrapped in copper. It keeps prying spy satellites from listening inside. This helmet employs the same principle."

"Still not interested," Taylor said.

"On the other hand, for Mr. Vey, this copper helmet is the worst thing I could be wearing." He leaned close to me. "If he could get his little hands on this he could fry my head like a Sunday roast. That's why we have him strapped down to a plastic chair." He smiled at me.

"I do hope you're comfortable."

"What are you going to do?" I asked. "Kill us?"

"Just some of you. Let me be clear about this. I want you, Michael. I want you to join us. I want to understand your power. But you're not cooperating." He stepped away from me. "Like you, during your vacation in Cell Twenty-Five, I've had a lot of time to think about things. I've decided that our problem here is really just a matter of credibility. You, Michael, won't cooperate because you lack trust. Trust that I will do what I have threatened to do. I'd like to show you otherwise. Like they say in the old movies, I need to show you that *I mean business*."

“So we’re going to have a demonstration with a couple of your friends. Proof of what I’ll do to your mother if you choose not to cooperate.” He took a step toward the door. “You may come in now.” He turned back to me. “Michael, I think you remember our friend Zeus.”

Zeus walked into the room. His long, oily blond hair was partially concealed beneath a copper helmet similar to the one Hatch wore. The last time I saw him he’d shocked my mother. I desperately wanted to get my hands on him.

“You creep,” I said.

“The name is Zeus,” he said.

“Your name is Zeus,” Taylor said. “Like the Greek god?” She rolled her eyes. “Puhleeeeeeeze.”

I could see Taylor trying to get to him but she couldn’t.

“I told you, Miss Ridley, you can’t get through our helmets,” Hatch said. “And as far as the name, that’s not the only similarity my boy here has with his Greek counterpart, is it Michael? Michael’s seen a demonstration of his gift. Like the Greek god, Zeus also throws lightning bolts.” He smiled at us. “So, Michael, to put it bluntly, Zeus is going to fry your friends.”

“You won’t do that,” I said.

“There you go,” Hatch said, flourishing his hand. “Lack of trust. You’ve just proved my point. Yes, I can do that and believe me, I will.”

“But you need them.”

“Wrong again. The truth is I’m only annoyed by your chubby little friend and frankly, Miss Ridley isn’t really of as much value to us alive as we thought she’d be. Fortunately, we have a carbon copy of her, so she is quite expendable. Our research team thinks an autopsy will prove most valuable. We’ve never dissected a Glow before; it could help the cause immensely.”

He turned to Taylor. “Did you ever dissect a frog in science class?” He smiled. “Of course you did. Now you’re the frog and some parts of you will be kept in little jars.”

Taylor looked pale, like she might throw up.

“I’ll give you whatever you want,” I said.

Hatch looked at me, his eyes narrowed with contempt. “You had that chance twenty-six days ago. Maybe now you’ll learn that, unlike you, I am a man of my word. We’ll discuss a new deal after my demonstration.”

He walked toward the door. “So, if you’ll pardon me, I think I’ll leave.” He looked at Ostin. “I hate the smell of burnt butter.”

“You’re a psycho!” Ostin shouted at Hatch.

Hatch grunted. “Little man, do you really think you could say anything that I would find remotely hurtful? It’s like being insulted by a slug. You are a donkey among thoroughbreds. How sad that there is nothing even vaguely special about you. You’re just so . . . average.”

“No he’s not,” Taylor said. “He’s brilliant. He’s a member of the Electroclan.”

Hatch grinned. “The Electroclan. That’s almost comical.” His expression darkened. “Too bad you got in the way of the big boys, Ostin, or you could still be home with mummy and daddy eating pizza. Good-bye.”

Hatch turned to Zeus. “When you’re done cooking our friends, call the guards and have Vey returned to Cell Twenty-Five to contemplate the consequences of his choices.” He looked at the guards.

“You might want to wait outside. Zeus is very powerful but not always accurate. Come with me, Nichelle.”

Nichelle smiled darkly at Taylor. "I'll miss you so much," she said sarcastically, then she followed Hatch out. The guards followed her and shut the door behind them, leaving the four of us alone. A wicked smile crossed Zeus's face. "All right, kiddies, it's playtime."

Taylor said, "Why are you doing this? You're one of us."

"I'm not one of you."

"You could be," I said. "You could join the Electroclan."

"What's that," he said laughing. "Your club? That's like booking a ticket on the *Titanic* after it hit the iceberg."

"What's your real name?" Taylor asked.

He turned to her. "Zeus."

"What's your first name?"

"Zeus."

"Your last name?"

"It's Zeus, Zeus, Zeus. First, last, middle, that's it."

"You really think you're going to kill us?" Ostin said. "Dude, you're like fifteen."

"Shut up," he said.

"No," I said. "He's right. Think about it."

"Yeah, think about this." He raised his hands and a quick burst of blue electricity arced between them. He stepped toward me. "Like that, electric boy?"

It was obvious that his electricity was different than mine. Mine came from within my body, while his seemed confined to the outside. I wondered how much he had to give. I, on the other hand, couldn't even stand under my own power.

He turned back around. "So who wants to go first? It's usually ladies before gentlemen, or maybe that doesn't apply to executions."

He walked over to Taylor. "Does it?"

"Go ahead," Taylor said.

He touched her cheek. "It's a shame you didn't decide to join us. We could have had some fun. We're going to rule the world, you know."

"Why would you want to do that?" Ostin asked.

"I thought you were supposed to be smart," Zeus said. "Oh, you have no powers at all. Except eating." He laughed.

"Hey," Ostin said. "Before you fry me, tell me something. I mean, unless they don't trust you with the scientific stuff."

Zeus looked at him angrily. "What?"

"I can't figure out how Hatch made that helmet work. I mean, the science of it doesn't make sense. Why doesn't the copper actually conduct the electricity and amplify Taylor's electromagnetic waves? Is there like a radio converter inside it?"

"It's just a helmet, doughboy."

"No, there's got to be something inside it. You probably just don't know that much about electricity."

Zeus's face turned red. "I'm made of electricity, idiot. It's just a stupid helmet."

“It couldn’t be. You must not have examined it. There’s got to be a little electric converter inside, maybe a little black pad with some circuit board. Did you notice some wires?”

“There’s not a stupid black pad inside—there’s no wires! It’s just a copper helmet, like a football helmet made of metal. Look, chubster.”

He started to pull off his helmet but noticed Taylor, who was looking a little too eager. He stopped. “Oh, I see. Well played, fat boy. You almost got me. You’re not as dumb as you look. Now prepare to fry.”

He lifted his hands.

“You surprise me, Zeus,” Taylor said. “You’re obviously really powerful. More powerful than any of us.”

He turned to her. “You said it.”

“You’re named after a god. You could be, like, the ruler of the world.”

He dropped his hands to his side. “What’s your point?”

She shrugged. “Nothing. I’m just surprised that you’re taking orders from Hatch. He should be taking orders from you. He tells you to kill us, you obey like a dog.”

Zeus looked confused. “Enough talking.” He turned back to Ostin. “You’re a nobody. You go first.” He again raised his hands.

“Hey, Zits,” I shouted. “What kind of electro *wimp* picks on kids without powers?”

He turned back to me. “What did you call me?”

“Zits,” I said. “Z-I-T-S. Actually, I don’t think you even need electric bolts. You could just breathe on us.” I looked him in the eyes and smiled.

“Seriously, dude, when was the last time you brushed your teeth?”

“Shut up!”

“No, really. Did you eat a diaper?”

“Shut up!” he shouted. He squinted. “Do you know how much I enjoyed guarding your mother? I shocked her at least a dozen times just to watch her squeal.”

“Yeah, well you could have just sat next to her and let her smell you. That would have been much worse. I’ve had hamsters with better hygiene.”

“Enough! Don’t think I won’t electrocute you, Vey!”

Taylor looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. “It’s his Tourette’s, he can’t help it.”

“I’m scared, Zits,” I said. “You know Hatch would have your head if you did. But here’s my promise: after I’m in charge, my first command is to make you my shoeshine boy. You’ll be following me around with a towel.”

“You’ll never be in charge.”

“No, that’s what Hatch said. You heard him. He wants my power. I’m not kidding, Zits. When Hatch was trying to get me to join you guys, he promised me that you would be my servant.”

Zeus looked at me with a worried expression. After a moment he shouted, “Shut up! And stop calling me Zits!”

“I don’t think I will. In fact, it’s going to be the first rule I make. I’m going to have everyone else call you that.”

“I don’t care what Hatch says. I’m gonna fry you, Vey.”

“Oooh, now I’m really shaking. You don’t have enough juice in you to light a flashlight.”

“Michael!” Taylor shouted. “Stop it. He’s got a temper. I’ve seen it.”

“You should listen to the cheerleader, Vey.” He stepped toward me. “You think you’re so cool. But you can’t shoot electricity like me, can you? You’re just a flesh-covered battery.”

“And you’re a flesh-covered outhouse. You should tie a couple hundred of those car air fresheners around your neck.”

“Last warning!” Zeus shouted.

“I’m not kidding, Zits. There are porta-potties with better aromas. Would a little deodorant kill you? What was the last year you took a bath?”

“That’s it!” He lifted his arms in front of himself and electricity arced between his fingers. “You’re gonna die!”

He pointed his hands toward me, letting loose a storm of crackling blue-white electricity. I surged at that precise moment and the sound of his electricity hitting the field of my electricity was like the crash of two cymbals. The room lit up as bright as a welder’s lamp.

To my surprise, I felt absolutely fine. Not only was my surge protecting me, but it wasn’t going away either. The longest I had ever held a surge was ten or fifteen seconds, but I wasn’t tiring at all. In fact, I was growing stronger. I was absorbing Zeus’s electricity. Even the weakness I felt from before was leaving me. There was so much electricity in the room that all of our hair was standing straight up. I looked over at Taylor. She stared at me in disbelief.

It’s not hurting me, I thought.

She nodded.

Can you read my mind?

She nodded again. The electricity in the room had caused some kind of bridge.

I can, I heard her say, even though her lips didn't move. Now I could read her thoughts as well.

Zeus could see that his electricity wasn't hurting me and he was getting angrier. He looked like a crazy man, his hands raised and moving. "Burn, Energizer!"

The foul stench of burning plastic filled the room. I looked down to see that my chair was melting. The plastic ties that the guard used to bind my wrists and legs had melted through and the vinyl band around my waist had melted as well. I was free.

I looked back up and smiled at Zeus. Rage burned in his eyes. He clenched his teeth and intensified his assault. But the force of his electricity only added to mine. I was getting stronger, and, from his appearance, he was growing weaker. Sweat was beading on his forehead and his breathing was heavy.

My skin began to glow a pale white, growing brighter and brighter until I was lit up like an incandescent lightbulb.

"Aaaargh!" he shouted in exhaustion, and the electricity stopped.

He flicked his hands as if his fingers had been burned. "Okay, then I'll burn her!"

He turned toward Taylor.

"No you won't," I said, standing up. He turned back to look at me. I was now glowing brighter than the overhead lights. I lifted my arms and held my palms out toward Zeus. "Try this." I pulsed.

A bright flash of light burst from me like a shock wave and Zeus screamed out as he was thrown against the wall. Taylor's and Ostin's chairs also flipped sideways. Zeus slid to the floor unconscious.

I ran to Taylor's side. "Are you okay?"

It took her a moment to answer. "I think so. I can't get loose."

I grabbed the plastic ties on her hands and surged and they melted in my hands. She reached down and unfastened her legs.

Then I ran to Ostin. He was lying still. I knelt down by him. "Ostin?"

He wasn't breathing.

"Buddy!" I put my head to his chest. His heart had stopped.

"Ostin!" I shouted. I burned off his bands and began to administer CPR. "His heart stopped," I shouted.

Taylor came to my side.

"Come on, Ostin," she said.

I put my ear to his chest. Nothing. Tears began to fill my eyes.

"You can't die, buddy. You can't."

I continued pressing his chest but nothing I did seemed to have any effect.

Then Taylor said, "Shock him."

"What?"

"Shock his heart. That's what doctors do when a heart stops."

I put my hand over his heart and pulsed. His whole body shook. I put my head to his chest, but there was nothing. "Ostin, buddy. Hang in there."

I put my hand on his heart again. "Surge." His body shook again.

Suddenly his body trembled. I put my head on his chest. "His heart's beating!"

“Yeah!” Taylor said.

A moment later Ostin groaned and his eyes opened. He looked at me, then said, “That hurt.”

I exhaled in relief. “Oh, man, that was close. Don’t ever scare us like that again.”

“Don’t ever shock me like that again.”

Zeus started to come to, groaning lightly. Taylor walked over and pulled off his helmet, throwing it behind her. He looked up at her.

“Where am I?”

“You’re on the ground,” she said. He began to lift his head but Taylor squinted and knocked him back down. “Don’t even think about it. And you better behave or Michael’s going to finish you.”

Ostin sat up, rubbing his chest. “How did you create a shock wave?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I think Zeus’s electricity made me stronger.”

Ostin smiled. “Just like I was theorizing, you can absorb electricity.”

Taylor pointed to a camera. “Hey, guys, whatever we’re doing we better hurry. We’re being watched.”

“No,” Ostin said. “The light’s off. Michael must have blown the camera with his surge.”

“Still, Taylor’s right,” I said. “We’ve got to move fast. There are guards outside the door.”

“What should we do with him?” Taylor asked, looking at Zeus.

Zeus looked up at me fearfully. *Don’t hurt me.*

I heard his voice clearly but his mouth hadn't moved. There was still enough electricity in the room that I could read minds without touching.

"Please don't hurt me," he said aloud.

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked.

He just stared at me, unable to come up with a reason.

I leaned close to him. "I'll tell you why. Because I'm not you and I'm not Hatch." I leaned in closer. "Think of a number between one and a million."

He looked at me. "What?"

"Think of a number," I said.

Five hundred twenty-six thousand and twelve, he thought.

"Five hundred twenty-six thousand and twelve," I said.

He looked at me in astonishment. "How did you do that?"

"I can read your mind, Zeus. And if you so much as think of shocking one of us, I'll fry you like a chicken nugget. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Why are you loyal to Hatch?" I asked.

He didn't answer in his thoughts or otherwise. I guess he didn't know.

"He's worthless," Ostin said. "We can't trust him."

I am worthless, Zeus thought.

Taylor looked at me. *Did you hear that?* she thought.

I nodded. What has he done?

Let's find out, Taylor thought. I'm going in deep.

Taylor knelt down next to Zeus and put her head against his. We watched as she went through him, like she was reading a book. After several minutes, her expression changed and she sat back up. "I see."

"What is it?" Ostin asked.

Taylor said to Zeus, "When you were a child did you kill your family in a swimming pool?"

The statement seemed to hit him as powerfully as my shock wave. He began trembling and he covered his face with his hands.

"Yes."

"Are you sure about that?" she asked.

He peered up at her. "What do you mean?"

Taylor looked at me and then back at Zeus. "I looked through your memories but I couldn't find a memory of the swimming pool. *Any* swimming pool. I only found what Hatch told you when you were little."

"That's the way Hatch works," I said to Taylor. "He makes people think they're bad so they'll do bad things. Zeus thinks he's evil so he's acting the part. Can you do anything with it?"

Taylor looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"Can you . . . change his mind?"

A smile came to her face. "I've never tried."

Zeus looked back and forth between us. "What are you going to do?"

"You didn't kill your family, Zeus," Taylor said. "I'm guessing that Hatch did, then convinced you that you had done it. Are you willing to let me

erase those lies?”

“Can you?”

“I’ve never done this before, but I’ll do my best.” She put her head against his. After about two minutes she moaned a little, then fell back.

“What happened?”

“I think I did it.”

Zeus lay there with his eyes closed.

I said, “Zeus, have you ever gone swimming?”

“No.”

“Never?”

He shook his head. “I can’t. I shock myself in water.”

“What happened to your family?”

He looked down. “I’m not sure.” His eyes welled up with tears.

“Something bad happened to them.”

I looked at Taylor. “Good job.”

“I don’t know why I tried to hurt you,” Zeus said.

“It’s because Hatch was controlling you,” I replied. “But he can’t anymore.”

“Tell me what to do.”

“Join the Electroclan. Help us bring this place down.”

He looked at me for a moment. Then I heard his thoughts. I’m with you.

“I’m with you,” he said, his voice echoing his thoughts. “What do you want

me to do?”

“You were with my mother when they took her. Do you know where she is?”

Zeus shook his head. “They took her to one of the other compounds.”

“There are other places like this?” Ostin asked.

“At least four. They’re in other countries and they’re bigger.”

“Do you know where they are?” I asked.

“There’s an office in Rome and a compound in the jungles of Peru. There’s at least one in Asia.” He frowned. “Sorry. That’s all I know.”

My heart ached. My mother had never seemed so far away. “Who runs the other compounds?” I asked.

“Hatch,” Zeus said. “He’s like the president. But he answers to the board.”

“Then Hatch will have records of the other compounds,” Ostin said.

Taylor said, “I don’t think Hatch will be eager to share.”

“No,” I said. “We’ll have to take them. But first, we’ve got to free the others.”

Just then the cell door swung all the way open and three guards ran into the room holding machine guns. “Everyone on the ground,” the first guard shouted. “Move your—” He stopped mid-sentence. “Move . . . uh.”

All three of the guards lowered their guns and looked at each other as if they’d suddenly forgotten why they cared. I smiled at Taylor.

“Zeus,” I said.

“No problem.”

Electricity arced from Zeus to all three guards. They dropped to the floor.

“Good job,” I said. “Let’s tie them up.”

We quickly cuffed two of the guards’ hands behind their backs.

As I was trying to get the handcuffs on the biggest of the guards, he suddenly turned on me. He jumped up, lifting me above his head. I pulsed and he screamed out, dropping me on top of him.

“You okay?” Ostin asked.

“Yeah,” I said, climbing off the guard. “He’s not.” I locked the guard’s hands in cuffs.

Ostin took their utility belts with concussion and smoke grenades and fastened one of them around his waist. “We’ve got to figure out how to get everyone out of here,” I said. “Let’s start with Ian and the girls, then we’ll get Jack and Wade.”

“What about Nichelle?” Taylor asked.

“Ostin, you’re the only one she can’t affect.”

He patted his weapons belt. “I’ll take care of her.”

“Zeus, while Ostin and I free Ian and the girls, you and Taylor go to the end of the hallway and make sure no one sneaks up on us.”

“What about the cameras in the hall?” Taylor asked.

“We’ve got to take them out,” I said.

“I know how do it,” Zeus said. “When I was eight I was fooling around and blew one out. Hatch put me on lockdown for an entire week.”

“Well, start with that one,” I said, pointing to a camera right outside our door. Zeus reached up and electricity jumped from his fingers to the

camera. The camera's light went off and the camera froze.

"Nice shootin', Tex," Ostin said.

"Thanks."

"Okay, let's go," I said. "I'll go first. Zeus, you and Taylor behind me, Ostin lock the cell then come up behind us."

"On it," he said.

We ran single-file down the hall to Ian and the girls' cell door.

Zeus blew out another three cameras as he and Taylor crept to the end of the hallway. Taylor cautiously peered around the corner. "It's clear," she said.

I pounded on the cell door. "Ian. Can you hear me?"

I heard a faint pounding back.

"He sees us."

"How are we going to open it?" Taylor asked.

"Zeus, can you concentrate your electricity and cut through it?"

"No. That's Bryan's gig."

"I know how to open it," Ostin said, winded from running back to us. "You can use your electricity."

"But Ian said it's an air lock," I said. "It doesn't work by electricity."

Ostin smiled. "That's the flaw in their design. The lock is air, but how does the lock get its air?"

I shrugged. "An air tank?"

“Yes, with an electronic valve. While I was locked inside I asked Ian to follow where the hose went. There’s an electronic valve above each cell door. If my calculations are right, all you have to do is blow the switch and the air pressure drops.”

“He’s good,” Taylor said.

“Where’s the valve?” I asked.

Ostin pointed above the door. “Right about there. A strong enough pulse should knock it out.”

It was at least four feet above me. “I need a lift,” I said.

“On it.” Ostin got down on all fours.

“You sure?” I asked.

“Just do it.”

I stepped on his back and reached as high as I could but it still wasn’t high enough. “This isn’t going to work.”

“Wait,” Taylor said. “We do this in cheerleading. Come here Ostin.”

Ostin stood.

“Take my hand like this.” They locked hands. “Now, Michael, step right there and we’ll lift you up.”

“You sure you can lift me?”

“Oh yeah, this is how we make our pyramids in cheer.”

I stepped on their arms.

“Lift!” Taylor said.

I rose higher than the door. “Awesome.” I put my hand flat against the wall above the doorjamb. “Here, Ostin?”

“That’s about right.”

“Here it goes.” I pulsed with all I had. The light next to me flickered.

“Now what?”

“Wait for it,” Ostin said.

Suddenly we heard the hiss of escaping air. The door clicked.

“You did it,” Ostin said.

“No, you did,” I said.

Taylor and Ostin let me down and I pushed open the door. Ian, McKenna, and Abigail were standing in the middle of the room waiting for us. Seeing them filled me with strong emotion. I ran up to Abigail and put my arms around her, then McKenna and Ian.

“You guys saved my life,” I said.

“You were very brave,” Ian said. “Amazingly brave. I don’t think I could have survived what you went through.”

“We’re proud of you,” McKenna said. Abigail nodded.

“Thank you. How can I ever repay you?”

“I think you just did,” Ian said, looking at the open door.

In the hallway an alarm went off, a bright red strobe accompanied by a deafening, shrill siren. Everyone covered their ears.

“Taylor, Ostin!” I shouted. “Give me another lift!”

They lifted me again. I reached up, grabbed the alarm, and pulsed.

The alarm wound down with a sound like a sick cow.

“Thank goodness,” Taylor said. “That was annoying.”

“Okay, let’s make a plan,” I said.

As we were talking, Ian was frantically looking around, up and down the ceiling then to the walls. “The guards are collecting,” he whispered. “There are two coming down the front hall towards us right now.”

“Where?” I asked.

He pointed toward the far wall, moving his finger along with them. “Right there, on the other side of the wall.”

“Ian, keep telling us where they are. Taylor, when they get close, reboot them. Zeus, the second you see their gun barrels blast them with electricity.”

“You got it, chief.”

I walked out into the corridor with Ian. He was now facing the far cell wall, following the guards’ movement. “They’re about at the corner,” Ian whispered. “Now.”

Zeus and I backed against the wall, just at the corner. I saw the glint of metal from two gun barrels and Zeus shot electricity from both hands. Both guards dropped to the ground. “You got ’em,” Ian said. “Two guards down.”

“Are there any more down here?” I asked.

“Not yet. But there are some moving down the stairwell.”

“Let’s take care of these two,” I said. Zeus and I dragged the two guards into the farthest part of the cell and handcuffed them together to the toilet,

then gathered again outside the cell. “We’ve got to free Jack and Wade and the rest of the GPs.”

“There’s a problem with that,” McKenna said. “They control all the collars from the command center. They could just set them all off and kill them all.”

“Where’s the command center?” Ostin asked.

“Fourth floor,” Ian said. “Next to the guards’ barracks.”

“Oh, great,” Ostin said. “We’ve been there.”

Ian smiled. “C’mon, Ostin. You didn’t want it to be too easy, did you? The honey’s always in the center of the hive.”

“So we’re headed to the fourth floor,” I said.

Ostin said, “Trust me, don’t take the elevator.”

“Then the only way out is the stairwell.”

“Which,” Ian said, “they’re covering.”

“Why haven’t they sent Nichelle down?” Taylor asked.

None of us knew. “Ian,” I said, “do you know how many guards there are?”

“I counted this afternoon and there were twenty-nine. Usually there are thirteen on duty during the day, and the other sixteen are split up between the other two shifts. But they all live here and right now they’re all on alert.”

“How do you know all this?” Ostin asked.

“I watch everything in the building. It’s kept me sane for three years.”

Just then the entire floor went black. We could see nothing but the glow of each other.

“They must have cut the power,” Ostin said. “That’s going to hurt them.”

“They have night-vision goggles,” Zeus said. “I’ve seen them run drills.”

“Oh. Then it’s going to hurt us.”

“No problem,” McKenna said. She immediately began to glow, lighting up the corridor.

“That’s so cool,” Ostin said. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

McKenna smiled.

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Not now, Ostin.”

“Sorry. Back to business. There were twenty-seven guards, we’ve taken out five, so there’s twenty-two left,” Ostin said. “I’ll keep count.”

“Ian,” I said, “what’s going on?”

“Six guards are covering the stairwell. There are three above us; the others are gathering on the second and fourth floor by the elevators.”

“Which elevators?”

“Front and back. They might be getting ready to stage another attack. Or they might be waiting for us.”

“What about the other electric children?” I asked.

“Hatch has them gathered on two.”

“What powers do they have?”

“Quentin can produce a small EMP.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Electromagnetic pulse,” Ostin blurted out. “It can knock out radios and stuff.”

“Bryan can burn through things. Tara can manipulate emotions . . .”

“Wait,” I said. “Can she create fear?”

Ian nodded. “Unfortunately.”

“She’s the one who was torturing you,” Abigail said.

“She’s as bad as Nichelle,” I said.

Taylor looked at me but said nothing.

“Speaking of which, where is Nichelle?” I asked.

“She’s on level two next to Hatch.” Ian looked straight up. “Two men just went up top. I think they’re getting the helicopter ready.”

“I bet Hatch is going to run,” I said. “How big is the helicopter?”

“It’s pretty big. It will hold Hatch and all the kids. If things go bad, Hatch will probably take them with him.”

“Well, things are going to go bad for them,” I said. “Let’s go.” We turned the corner and ran down the next length of hall to the stairwell. Zeus continued down the hallway past the stairwell, blowing out five more cameras, which he could see from their glowing red diodes.

With McKenna’s light we could see both elevators from where we stood, one in front of us, the other at the end of the hall—the same elevator Ostin and I had come through when we first entered the building. I could see under the door that the stairwell was still lit and as I opened the door bullets immediately began to fly. I jumped back and I could hear bullets ricocheting inside.

“Where exactly are they?” I asked Ian.

Ian looked up and down. “They’re on floors one, two, and four. There are six of them.”

“What are they doing? I mean, what are their positions?”

“Two of them are coming down the stairs. The rest are leaning over the railings with guns.”

“Taylor, do you think you could reboot them all at once?”

“I’ll try.”

“I’ll open the door,” Abigail said.

“Ready?” I asked.

Taylor nodded. She put her hands on her temples. “Go.”

Abigail pulled open the door and this time there was no gunfire. I slid my hand inside and grabbed the railing and pulsed with all of my power. There was a loud chorus of screams and I could hear guns and men falling down the stairs.

“You got four of them,” Ian said. “One of them crawled out of the well onto the second floor, and the other ran back out on the fourth.”

“How bad are the four?”

“They’re not moving.”

“Eighteen left,” Ostin said.

“Let’s move,” Zeus said.

“How many are on the next floor up?”

Ian looked back and forth. “Three.”

“Near the stairwell?”

“No. That’s the GP level; they’re guarding the prisoners.” He cocked his head. “Wait, there’s some motion on the third floor.”

“The kids?” Taylor asked.

“Maybe. I’m having trouble seeing through them. Nichelle must be near.”

“Let’s move up to the next floor.” We all started to climb the stairwell. Suddenly I stopped.

“What are you doing?” Zeus asked.

“It’s no good,” I said. “This isn’t going to work.”

“What?” Taylor said.

“We can’t make it,” I said. “We’ll never make it out of here. They’re going to kill us.”

“Stop talking that way,” Taylor said.

“No, he’s right,” Zeus said. “It’s hopeless.”

Taylor’s eyes flashed. “No,” she said, “it’s Tara.” She looked back.

“Abigail, take Michael’s and Zeus’s hands. Quick.”

Abigail ran up half a flight. The instant she touched my hand the fear left. “What happened?” I asked.

“It’s Tara. My sister.”

“Tara’s your sister?”

“She’s my twin. I’ll tell you about it later.”

“She’s your sister?” I repeated.

“I can handle her,” Taylor said as she looked up. She put her hands on her temples and concentrated. A scream echoed down the stairwell. “Stop it, Taylor!” Tara shouted.

“You stop it!” Taylor shouted back. “Leave my friends alone.”

“Your friends are going to die.”

“No they’re not. Why are you helping Hatch? You’re better than that.”

“Dr. Hatch is better. He’s doing the right thing.”

“Hatch is evil. He killed your parents.”

“They weren’t really my parents.”

“You don’t really believe that. Think for yourself, Tara.”

“You can’t change the world without casualties.”

“You’re saying everything he’s brainwashed you with. What do you believe?”

“You’re the brainwashed one.”

“Hatch told you that too, didn’t he? The first thing you tell someone you’ve brainwashed is that everyone else is brainwashed.”

Tara didn’t answer.

“C’mon, Tara. You’re better than that. Join us.”

“I’m not one of you. I’m special. I have special abilities.”

“You do, Tara. And you used those special abilities to hurt that man on the motorcycle. What good have you ever used them for?”

“That man on the motorcycle was just human.”

“I’m human, Tara. And so are you. Would you kill me if Hatch told you to?”

She didn’t answer.

“Would you?”

“You can keep pecking in the dirt, Taylor. But I’m not a chicken. I’m an eagle.”

Then there was silence.

“She went back inside,” Ian said.

I touched Taylor’s shoulder. “I didn’t know that you had a sister.”

Taylor’s face bent in anger. “I don’t.”

47. The Escape

We crept up to the GP level: me and Zeus in front, followed by Ostin, Ian, and Taylor, with McKenna and Abigail bringing up the rear. The cameras inside the stairwell were panning back and forth like animals, heads up, watching for danger.

“Zeus, take those things out,” I whispered.

“On it.”

One by one Zeus blasted the cameras. Their blinking red lights went dark and they drooped, as if hanging their heads in defeat. Then the stairwell itself went dark.

“I think they’re trying to make this difficult,” Zeus said.

“No problem,” McKenna said. She began to glow again.

“McKenna,” I said, “stay close to the wall. You make an easy target.”

She pressed back against the wall.

“Ian, where are they?” I whispered.

“Three guards on GP, two guards on level one and six on two—three guarding the doors and three with Hatch and the children. They’ve abandoned the third floor. There are seven guards on four and three scientists. It looks like they’re preparing for a battle on the fourth floor.”

“They must have guessed that’s where we’re going,” I said.

As we came up to the first level I whispered to Ian, “How close to the door are they?”

“One’s touching it, the other’s standing by the elevator.”

I put my hand on the door and pulsed. We could hear the guard's gun hit the floor.

"Seventeen," Ostin said.

Suddenly Ian shouted, "Move, move!"

We scattered. Bullets started ripping through the door.

When the gunfire paused, Zeus asked Ian, "Where is he?"

Ian pointed. Zeus shoved his finger through one of the holes and fired back with a bolt of electricity.

"Got him," Ian said. "You are good."

"Thanks," Zeus said.

"Sixteen," Ostin said. "We're forty percent there."

We approached the door to the second floor cautiously. Hatch was on level two and there were the electric children and six guards. Fortunately, with the stairwell cameras dead, they were blind to our movement.

On our way up to the third floor we had to step over the bodies of two of the guards from our first battle. They were still unconscious. McKenna and Abigail put on the guards' bulletproof vests, even though they hung to the girl's knees. Then Ostin and I handcuffed the guards and stripped them of their weapons. Ostin added one of their knives to his utility belt, which looked like a small sword on him. I took one of the rifles and jammed it between the door and the railing to keep the door from being opened behind us.

With each step, Ian looked from side to side as he kept track of everything going on in the building. My biggest fear was that Hatch would attack with Nichelle and the electric children, but with the exception of Tara, they kept their distance.

“He can’t risk them,” Zeus said to me. “The kids are too valuable. The guards are dispensable.”

We stopped on the stairwell between levels three and four. There was another guard’s body on the stairs. We stripped the guard of his weapons. We now had more than we could carry, so we dropped them down the stairwell. Ostin put on the guard’s bulletproof vest.

Ian groaned. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What?” I said.

“On level four they’re setting up inside the door with a flamethrower.”

“A flamethrower?” Ostin asked. “If we open the door that will fill the whole stairwell.”

“It’s worse, they’ve even armed the scientists. Superman couldn’t make it through that door alive.”

I looked back down the stairwell. “I’ve got an idea. How many guards on three?”

“None, they’ve abandoned the floor.”

“You’re sure?”

He looked again. “Yes.”

“Ostin, how much smoke does one of these smoke grenades make?”

“Well, if they’re like the ones on the Discovery Channel, they’ll each produce forty thousand cubic feet of smoke in about thirty-five seconds.”

“How many cubic feet is the fourth floor?”

Ostin loved questions like that. “I estimate this place is about forty-four hundred square feet per floor, the ceiling’s about eight feet high, so, if my

calculations are accurate that's thirty-five thousand, two hundred cubic feet of space per floor."

I grinned. "So twelve smoke grenades would cover it."

"The smoke will be so thick they could chew it like bubble gum.

But how do we get the smoke grenades up there?"

"No problem," I said. "Follow me."

We climbed back down to the third level—the floor of the electric children suites. Knowing that the cameras were still live, Zeus went inside alone to take out the cameras, while I explained the plan to everyone else. A minute later Zeus opened the stairwell door on three. "All clear. The cameras are dead."

We all went inside.

Abigail and McKenna each called an elevator. When the elevators arrived they pushed the button for the fourth floor, then stepped back out and held the elevator doors open.

"Everyone ready?" I asked.

"Let's roll," Zeus said.

The elevators began to beep from being detained.

"Ostin?"

"Ready," he shouted from the stairwell.

"Now!"

At my signal Ostin leaned out the stairwell door and threw a concussion grenade up to the fourth floor, while Abigail and McKenna pulled the pins on their smoke grenades, six apiece, threw them into the elevators, and let

the elevators go. A half-minute later Ian started to laugh. "It's working." Smoke was filling the fourth level.

"Taylor, now!" I shouted.

Taylor began concentrating, trying to create as much general confusion as she could.

We could hear the guards and scientists above us in a state of panic.

"They're running around like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off," Ian said. "They're climbing out the windows."

Within five minutes the guards and scientists had completely vacated the floor. We went back to the stairwell. Smoke from our grenades had seeped into the stairwell and Ostin was covering his mouth and nose with his shirt, which he had pulled up through his vest.

"They're all gone," I said.

"Nine guards left," Ostin said.

"How's the smoke?" I asked Ian.

"It's dissipating. Give it a few more minutes."

I climbed past Ostin and tried the door. "It's bolted shut," I said. "Any ideas, Ostin?"

Suddenly the bolt slid and the door opened. Abigail and McKenna were standing there.

I looked at them curiously. "How'd you get up here?"

McKenna smiled. "We took the elevator."

We covered our noses and walked into the room. The smoke had mostly dissipated but its odor hadn't, leaving the room bathed in a pungent,

sulfurous smell. Ostin stopped to look at the mounted guns they had facing the door. “Whoa. That’s a Barrett M182 anti-matériel rifle retrofitted with a M2A1-7 flamethrower.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“Discovery Channel.”

“That’s nasty,” Ian said, scratching his head.

“Ian, I’m going to release the prisoners,” I said. “Will you keep watch?”

“Sure thing.”

The command center was located at the front end of the floor, opposite from the stairwell we’d just come through. The room was open with large glass panels so that inside we could still see the stairwell and the rest of our group. There were two large consoles, each about the size of a car’s hood, and as loaded with buttons and switches as a jet cockpit.

“Man, this is cool,” Ostin said. “I need one of these in my room.”

The first console had fourteen small screens stacked on top of each other in five levels, the numbers corresponding with each level of the building except for the GP level, which was missing. The images on these screens, each numbered, were constantly changing, switching between more than a hundred security cameras. However, thanks to Zeus’s handiwork, only the first, second, and fourth floor monitors were completely live. Next to the screens was a long row of buttons allowing the operator to select and control any camera on the grounds.

“These are all the building’s security cameras,” I said to Ostin, pointing to a monitor. “See, there’s the main hall, the yard, and the students’ suites.”

“The students’ suites?” Zeus asked, walking into the room. “I completely took the third floor camera out.”

“Not all of them. There are still the ones in the bedrooms.”

“There are cameras in the bedrooms?” Zeus asked, looking surprised. “I didn’t know we were being watched all the time. That’s kind of . . . embarrassing.”

Unfortunately we had taken out all the cameras in the stairwell, which would have been useful to us now.

Taylor joined us in the command center.

The second console was entirely dedicated to the GP level. There was a bank of twenty-five small screens, each with a number, all surrounding one large, central monitor. On the small screens we could see the GPs. There was little movement in the cells; the prisoners were either lying on their beds or sitting on them. In one room a few were on the ground playing cards.

“Interesting,” Ostin said, watching them. “They’ve created their own sign language.”

All but two of the cells were full and most had more than one occupant, some as many as four.

On the main console there were twenty-five panels, each with three buttons, a toggle switch, a sliding switch, and two green diodes.

In the center of the console was a microphone.

“Ostin, help me figure this out,” I said.

Ostin walked up behind me and looked over the console. “Each screen and panel corresponds with a cell and if you push the red button”—he reached over and pushed the red button on Cell 5 and the video image of two GPs playing cards on the small screen appeared on the central monitor—“you can enlarge the view of a single cell.”

He pushed the button again and the image zoomed in still more. He did it until we could actually read the cards one of the prisoners held in his hand.

“That’s one way to cheat at cards,” Zeus said.

“And this toggle switch moves the camera.” Ostin pushed the button to the right and the camera panned right. “Man, I wish I had one of these.”

He looked at the buttons on the panels below the red one. They were labeled VOX, PL, EC. EC had a sliding button beneath it.

“VOX, of course, is the intercom system. PL . . .” Ostin rubbed his chin as he thought. “Pneumatic locks. The green light tells you that it’s locked. And EC would be electric collars. I’m guessing that the sliding button below them would intensify the severity of the shock; the green light signals that it’s on.”

“Look around for Jack,” I said.

“Is that him in nine?” Taylor said, pointing to a small screen. The man in the cell was lying on his back looking up at the ceiling.

I pushed the red button on nine and the picture came up on the central monitor.

“Push it again,” Ostin said.

I pushed the button twice until the man’s face took half the screen. “That’s him,” Taylor said.

“I didn’t recognize him with the beard,” I said.

“Where’s Wade?” Ostin asked. “They’re not together?”

I honestly didn’t know if Wade was still alive. I hadn’t had the chance to tell them anything about what had happened to us. “Keep looking,” I said.

“There he is,” Ostin said. “In Eleven.”

I pushed the button on eleven and the image filled the screen.

Wade wasn't alone. There was another man in the same room.

"He's almost across the hall from Jack," I said.

I pushed the button on 9 again and the picture of Jack came back up on the center screen. I pushed the VOX button on the 9 panel.

"Jack."

He suddenly looked up toward the corner of the room.

"Jack, can you hear me?"

He looked around, as if trying to figure out where the voice had come from.

"Jack, it's me, Michael. Are you okay?"

This time he nodded.

"I can't hear anything," I said to Ostin.

"He's not speaking. He still has the electric collar on."

"Right." I looked down at the panel. "Which way should I push it to deactivate it?"

"Try pushing it to the right," Taylor said.

I started to slide the switch to the right but immediately Jack grabbed the collar and dropped to his knees.

"Stop! Stop!" Ostin shouted.

"Sorry. My bad," Taylor said into the microphone.

"Rules out the right," I said.

I slid the switch to the left. The green light on the panel went off.

“I think you did it,” Ostin said.

“Jack,” I said into the microphone, “I think we’ve disarmed your collar. Try speaking.”

He looked nervous. “Michael,” he said in a raspy voice. A look of relief came across his face. “Thanks. Where are you?”

“We’ve escaped. We’ve taken control of the main command center. We’re going to unlock all the doors in the prison, but there are still three guards on your floor. We want you to get Wade and help us.”

“I don’t know where Wade is,” Jack said.

“He’s close. He’s in Cell Eleven. That’s directly across the hall, one cell to the right. I’m going to unlock your door, but don’t open it until I tell you to. Taylor, where are the guards?”

“There’s one coming down the hall toward Nine.”

“Hold tight, Jack. Ostin, on my word, unlock Wade’s cell.”

“Got it.”

“He’s turning back,” Taylor said.

“Okay, Jack, be sure to shut your door so they don’t suspect anything.”

“Got it.”

“Ready. Go.” I pushed the PL button and a light on the panel turned green.

“Wait,” Jack said, “there’s no handle on the inside of the door. I can’t open it.”

“I got an idea,” Ostin said. He walked over to the other console, looked around for a moment, then pushed a button.

“The door just opened a little,” Jack said.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I turned on the hall air conditioner and created negative air—”

“That was smart,” Taylor said, cutting him off.

“Thanks.”

“Okay, where’s the guard, Taylor?”

“Still on the other end of the hall.”

“Ostin, open Cell Eleven.”

“Got it.”

“Okay, Jack. Go. Fast.”

Jack pried open his cell door, stepped out into the corridor, pulled his door shut, then pushed in the door at Cell 11. I hit the red button on 11 and the image took full screen. We watched the reunion. Wade stood as Jack entered and the other inmate just stared anxiously.

“Ostin, shut off their collars. To the left.”

“Got it. Done.”

I pushed the VOX. “Jack, shut the door. We turned off the collars, but keep your voices down.”

Wade looked around, afraid to speak.

“It’s okay, you can talk,” Jack said.

“Who is that?” Wade asked.

“It’s Michael,” Jack said. “They’ve escaped.”

He looked at the camera. “You’re the man, Michael.”

“Can you take your collars off?”

“Yeah, they’re just buckled like a seat belt. Are you sure they’re turned off? Because the collars are programmed to go off on full if we try to take them off.”

“They’re off,” Ostin said, then turned to me and shrugged. “I think,” he said to me.

The three of them quickly removed their collars.

“Guys, here comes the guard,” Taylor said.

“Ostin, can you figure out how to shut off the lights on the floor?”

He went over to the other console. “Just a minute.” He quickly scanned the board. “I think this is it.”

“Jack, the guard is coming. When he passes your cell we’re going to shut off the lights. Can you and Wade jump him and drag him back into your cell?”

“My pleasure. Wade, you hit low, I’ll take his arms.”

“Count me in,” the other inmate said.

“We have night vision here,” I said, “so wait for our command.”

“Got it.”

“He’s nearing the cell,” Taylor said. “Okay, he’s past the cell.”

“Ostin, now,” I said.

The GP level screens all went dark. Suddenly the images on them changed from black to pale green, ghostlike images.

I whispered. “Jack, can you see anything?”

“No.”

“The guard is three feet to your right, directly in front of your old cell. He’s facing Cell Nine. Open your door.”

He opened the door. The guard must have heard my voice and started to turn back.

“Now!”

The three of them blindly charged the guard. Wade hit first, wrapping his arms around the guard’s legs, while Jack knocked him over. The other inmate grabbed the guard around the neck. The guard was flailing around but had no idea who or what had hit him. Truthfully, the attack didn’t look a whole lot different than back when Jack and his posse tried to pants me. The three of them dragged the guard back into their cell.

“Eight guards,” Ostin said.

“Lights on,” I said.

The lights came back on. The two remaining guards just looked around, confused by what had happened.

“Shut the door,” I said.

Wade pushed the door shut. The third inmate still had the guard by the throat and Jack pinned his arms behind his back as Wade handcuffed him. Then Jack pulled off all the guard’s weapons, taking a rifle, Taser, and concussion grenade. He handed a pistol and a smoke grenade to Wade and the truncheon and Mace to the other inmate.

The inmate immediately sprayed the Mace in the guard's face. "Feels good, don't it?"

The guard gasped and sputtered. "Don't kill me."

"Keep your mouth shut," Jack said to the guard. "You call for help and it will be the last thing you do."

"Put a collar on him," Ostin said into the microphone, "and we'll reactivate it at full."

"Gladly," Jack said. He fastened one of the collars around the guard's neck.

I slid the switch. "Reactivated," I said.

"Welcome to the other side," Jack said. He turned to the other inmate and put out his hand. "What's your name?"

"Salvatore."

"You did well, Salvatore."

"Grazie."

Zeus said, "If you can manually control the elevators, I can take out the front guard, while Jack takes out the other guard. Then we can start bringing the prisoners up here, bypassing the guards on two."

"Brilliant. Except you better have Ian go with you, so you don't walk into an ambush. Ostin, you're in charge of the elevators. Abigail and McKenna, keep watch on the monitors."

"What about me?" Taylor asked.

"Will you help me?"

"Of course."

I got back on the speaker. “Jack, there are only eight guards left, Hatch and six electric children. We’re going to start transporting all the prisoners up to the fourth floor and arm them. We’ve got a whole weapons depot up here. What will happen if I unlock all the doors?”

“They’re pretty keyed up,” he said. “Prison riot. Could turn ugly.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.”

“There’re a few guys who could really help us, though.”

“How many?”

“Half dozen.”

“Okay, this is the plan. There are two guards still on your floor, one in each corridor. Ian and Zeus are going to come down the front elevator and take out the first guard. There’s a guard at the end of the corridor to your left. You’re going to have to keep him from helping out the other guard.”

Jack took out his grenade. “No problem.”

“When you’ve secured the floor, tell us where your friends are. Give the weapons you capture to the ones you trust and then start bringing them up here six at a time. I need you and Wade up here with us. Hatch may launch a counterattack up the stairwell.”

“Got it.”

Zeus and Ian walked over to the elevator. “We’re ready.”

“On it,” Ostin said. He opened the elevator door. “Level GL. I’m going to cut the lights again. Ian, when you get there tell Zeus where to fire. And stay away from the elevator door; the guard is still armed; he may just fire at the sound of the doors opening.”

“Got it.”

They stepped into the elevator. Ostin shut the door and sent them down. Then he again cut the lights on that level. We could see the guards on our screens freeze in their positions.

“Look!” Abigail said. “The stairwell door.”

Fire and sparks began shooting through the stairwell door. “Someone’s cutting their way in here,” I said.

“It must be Bryan,” McKenna said. “He can do that.”

“Taylor!” I shouted, “See what you can do to stop him!”

Taylor walked closer to the stairwell and focused her attention on the door. “Nothing’s happening.”

Ostin was still staring at his monitor. “Zeus and Ian have reached ground level,” he said.

There was a bright flash of lightning on the screen. “Seven guards,”

Ostin shouted. “What’s Ian doing?”

On the monitor, Ian looked frantic. He ran down the hall toward Cell 11.

Already a full line had been cut through the door. “Michael!” Taylor shouted, “I can’t stop them!”

“Ostin, who’s out there?”

“I can’t tell. Zeus shot out the cameras.”

I turned back to the console. “Ostin, lights up on GL.” I pushed the master VOX. “Jack, one of our guys, Ian, is about to come around the corner behind you. Don’t shoot him. Can you take the other guard out?”

Jack raised a hand. “On it. Do it Wade.”

Wade threw a smoke grenade down to the end of the hall. The guard vanished behind a cloud of smoke.

“We’ve got you surrounded, man!” Jack shouted. “You’re the only one left. Surrender your weapon now or we start shooting.”

The choking guard threw his gun out ahead of him. “Don’t shoot. I surrender.”

“Get on your knees and put your hands behind your back.” Jack turned back to Wade. “Get a collar.”

“Six guards left!” Ostin shouted.

Ian rounded the corner and pushed open the cell door. He was out of breath, “Michael, can you hear me?”

“I’m here,” I said.

He gasped out his warning. “It’s Bryan . . . he’s cutting through the . . . stairwell wall.”

“We can see the sparks. Is he wearing a helmet?”

“Yes.”

I looked at Taylor. “Get away from there. You can’t help.”

Just then Zeus walked into the cell behind Ian, carrying the guard’s weapons. “What’s going on?”

“Michael,” Ian said. “Bryan’s with Hatch and three guards. And he has Nichelle with him. They’re coming for you.”

48. Overload the Circuit

Hearing that Nichelle was on the other side of the wall sent chills through me.

“Michael, we’ve got to get out of here,” Taylor said.

“I need to finish. Hatch could still kill all the prisoners. Abigail, McKenna, get out of here.”

“We’re not leaving you,” they said.

Sparks bounced off the floor as Bryan completed the second cut.

“He’s halfway through,” Taylor said.

“I’m not going out without a fight,” Ostin said. He ran from the console over to the flamethrower.

“Ostin, I need you back here,” I said. “I need you to unlock all the prison doors and turn off all the collars.”

He turned to me. “We’ve got to stop them.”

Taylor went to the flamethrower. “You go, I’ll do it.” She crouched down next to the machine as Ostin ran back to the console and started hitting switches.

I hit the central VOX button. “Attention prisoners. This is Michael Vey, we are freeing you. We’re unlocking all the doors. Your collars will soon be deactivated. As soon as the light goes off, take them off as quickly as you can. We’re under attack, so we don’t have much time. Ian, Jack, and Zeus will help get you out of the building. Do exactly as they say.”

“How does this work?” Taylor said.

“Just pull the top trigger,” Ostin said. “But not now. It will set the floor on fire.”

“Michael!” Jack shouted over the intercom, “We’re coming up the stairwell to rescue you!”

“Just be careful.”

“Hey!” Ostin shouted. “Zeus is coming back up the elevator.”

I looked over. “What? Tell him to turn back.”

“I can’t. There’s no intercom in there.”

The cutting had started again and Bryan completed another line in the wall.

“He’s almost through!” Taylor yelled. “Ostin, are you done?”

“Just about.”

“Ian, all the collars are just about off. I don’t know how long we can hold the floor, so use the elevators with caution.”

“Got it, Michael.”

The front elevator door opened and Zeus walked out.

“What are you doing here?” I shouted to him.

“I need to face Hatch,” Zeus said.

“Send him an email. Nichelle’s with him. Take the girls and get out of here.”

“We’re not leaving,” McKenna said again.

Taylor looked back at me and shook her head. “I’m not leaving you alone.”

“McKenna, Taylor, these are Hatch’s personal guards. They’ll kill you. They’ll kill all of us. Just get out. Please.”

Just then Bryan completed the last cut and the thick plated metal fell forward, crashing onto the floor. A concussion grenade flew through the hole at us, exploding in the middle of the room. Taylor screamed, falling to the floor behind the flamethrower.

“Put down your weapons,” Hatch shouted, “or we’ll throw in real grenades!”

“They have those?” Ostin asked.

“I don’t want to find out,” I said. “Okay!” I yelled. “Taylor, back away from the flamethrower.”

A moment later a guard stuck his head through the hole in the door. He looked around, then stepped inside. He was wearing a different uniform than I’d seen before—a bright green, rubberized suit with a helmet and bulletproof vest. He pointed his gun at us, as if daring one of us to engage him. Then Hatch, wearing the copper helmet, stepped through the hole behind him, closely followed by Nichelle and two other guards. Hatch looked around the room and said to me, “Quite a mess you made of things, Vey.”

“I did my best,” I said.

Zeus was standing in the middle of the hall, halfway between Hatch at the stairwell and me at the console. Hatch looked at Zeus and his face twisted in a scowl. “Well, Frank, you turned out to be quite a disappointment.”

“My name’s not Frank,” Zeus said.

“You’re right. It’s Leonard. Leonard Frank Smith. That’s all you are now. What a pity. I made you into a god and you chose to be Frank. I’d laugh if it wasn’t so pathetic.”

“You gave me a title so you could make me your slave. You lied to me. You lied to all of us.”

“Who told you that, Frank, the liar Vey?” He looked at me, then back to Zeus. “It’s not too late for you, Frank. Take out Taylor, Abigail, and McKenna right now and I’ll let you back into the family.”

The girls looked at him anxiously.

“Really?” Zeus said. “You’ll let me be your minion again? What a deal.”

“Nichelle,” Hatch said.

Suddenly the worst pain I’d felt yet pierced my skull. Nichelle had always claimed that Hatch made her hold back but now, for the first time, I believed her. Taylor, McKenna, Abigail, Zeus, and I all screamed out.

At the same time the pop and spray of gunfire echoed in the stairwell and a concussion grenade exploded behind Hatch and the guards. One of the guards from the stairwell stumbled backward into our room. “Dr. Hatch, the GPs are attacking from below. We can’t hold them long. There’s at least two dozen of them.”

“You two help him,” Hatch said, and two of his three guards climbed back through the hole into the stairwell. Hatch turned back to us. “Poor, misguided Zeus. You picked the wrong curtain. I gave you power and privilege. I gave you identity. Michael Vey gave you this . . .”

“Michael gave me freedom. You’ve done nothing for me that wasn’t in your best interest. That’s all this is about—absolute obedience to you. That’s what you want from the whole world. But you’re nothing, Hatch.”

Hatch’s expression turned fierce. “Nichelle, show Frank what nothing truly is. Show no mercy.”

She smiled, then looked at Zeus, who immediately fell to his knees, grabbing his temples and screaming.

Then she turned it on all of us. “You insignificant little cretins,” Nichelle said. “I told you that I could squash you all like mosquitoes.”

Taylor, McKenna, Abigail, and Taylor simultaneously crouched over in pain. My knees buckled and I fell to the ground behind the console. As I writhed in agony, Ostin looked at me helplessly, then crawled past me under one of the consoles and pulled the cord out of the wall. He took the knife from his utility belt and cut the end of the cord and handed me the frayed end.

“Put this in your mouth,” Ostin whispered.

I looked at him but did nothing. I was in too much pain to speak and everything seemed to be spinning around me. I was on the verge of passing out. Ostin put the cord in my hand.

“Just do it!” he said.

I lifted the end of the cord to my mouth as he plugged it back into the wall. Electricity sparked in my mouth and a surge of power hit my body. Immediately, the dizziness left me and I felt normal again. Actually, I felt better than normal. I felt stronger.

Ostin crawled closer to me and whispered. “Michael, listen to me. I think I know how to stop Nichelle. Overload the circuit.”

I pulled the cord from my mouth; the power was still flowing into my hand. “What?”

“Don’t hold back, give her everything at once. Like blowing a breaker at home.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Trust me.”

I looked at him for a moment, then I heard Taylor scream out in pain. “Stop, please, stop! Michael!”

“Get behind me, Ostin.” I forced myself to one knee, then to my feet.

Nichelle was now focusing her attention on Taylor, who was screaming in agony.

“Hey, Nichelle!” I shouted.

She turned and looked at me.

“You want my electricity? Take it!” I spread out my arms and surged with everything.

Nichelle suddenly started shaking and her expression changed from cruelty to fear. “What are you doing?”

“Keep it up!” Ostin shouted.

Hatch looked at me, then back at Nichelle. “Nichelle, stop him! That’s an order!”

I continued to surge.

“What are you doing?” Nichelle repeated, her voice now trembling. “Stop it! That hurts! Stop!”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

Taylor, Zeus, and the girls all stopped shaking. Nichelle had released them.

“Stop it!” Nichelle screamed again, then she began convulsing as if she were having a seizure.

“What’s going on?!” Hatch shouted. “Answer me!”

Nichelle fell to her knees, doubling over in agony. “Stop! Please, stop!”

Hatch turned to me, his jaw clenched, his face red with anger. Sweat beaded on his forehead. For a second we just stared at each other.

Then a guard shouted to Hatch from the stairwell. “Sir, they’re on us! You’ve got to get out now!”

Hatch pulled a revolver from beneath his jacket and pointed it at me. “You did this, Vey. Now pay.” He pulled the trigger.

As the gun erupted, lightning flashed across the room and hit the bullet just inches in front of me, blowing it into nothing. Then Zeus turned and hit the gun itself. Hatch screamed out in pain, throwing his gun in the air.

“My name is *Zeus!*”

There was another explosion in the stairwell. “Sir, we’ve got to go *now!*” the guard shouted, grabbing Hatch’s shoulder.

“Help me!” Nichelle cried.

Hatch was holding his arm and glanced down at her. “You’re nouse to me anymore.”

“But I’m your friend.”

“You betrayed your own kind, Nichelle. No one likes a traitor. Even those they serve.”

Hatch looked at me once more, his face twisted in hatred, then he ducked back out into the stairwell and climbed up to the roof.

“Zero guards,” Ostin shouted as he stood up from behind the console.

Nichelle was on her knees, looking at me fearfully. I surged once more. She let out a yelp, then collapsed to the ground in an unconscious heap. A faint wisp of smoke rose from her body.

I let go of the electric cord and fell to one knee, exhausted.

The battle continued to rage in the stairwell as Jack and the prisoners pushed past our floor to the roof.

Ostin looked at me, then Zeus, then back at me. “That was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen,” he said. “A bullet travels at a mile a second, lightning travels at a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second. That rocked.”

Ostin looked around. Smoke was still wafting through the room and we all seemed frozen in place, like survivors of a natural disaster.

He walked over to Nichelle and pushed her with his foot.

“Is she dead?” Taylor asked.

Ostin knelt down and put his hand on her neck. “No.”

Just then, Ian climbed through the stairwell into the room. “Michael, Hatch is gone. He escaped in the helicopter.”

“With all the kids?”

“That I could see.”

I sat down on the floor and raked my hand back through my hair. Then I looked over at Ostin. I’m sure it was the release of tension, but I suddenly started to laugh.

Taylor looked at me like I’d gone crazy. “What’s so funny?”

“Ostin,” I said, slowly shaking my head. “Ostin is. ‘Overload the circuit.’ Where in the world did you get that idea?”

Ostin said defensively, “Nichelle gave it to me. When she called you all mosquitoes.”

“What?” Taylor said.

“Have you ever had a mosquito on your arm, but rather than swat it, just squeezed the skin around where it’s sucking?”

“You had a strange, sick childhood,” Taylor said.

“No, really, it’s cool. The mosquito can’t disengage, so it just fills up with blood until it explodes. I figured that since your natural reaction to Nichelle was always to resist, that she had probably just been dragging your powers out of you a little at a time, like sucking out of a straw. I figured if you just gave it to her all at once, she wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

“Brilliant,” I said. “Brilliant.” I looked over at Zeus. He was standing quietly, leaning against the wall, his head bowed. “Hey, Zeus,” I said.

He slowly turned around. “Frank,” he said. “I’m just Frank.”

I shook my head. “No, dude, you’re definitely Zeus.”

He smiled.

“He’s right,” Taylor said. “You’re Zeus.” She walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek. “You were awesome. You were more than awesome—you were a hero.”

“Thanks.” He touched his cheek. “You’re the first girl who’s ever kissed me.”

Taylor smiled. “You deserved it.”

Just then, Jack and Wade came in through the hole. Jack opened his arms to me. “Michael, my man,” he said, walking up to me. “Stand up, Vey, I’m going in for the bromance.”

I stood and Jack embraced me, almost knocking me over. Then he stepped back and announced, “First time I ever hugged a dude I didn’t have a choke hold on.”

Wade stood a few yards behind Jack, staring at me. “You saved my life, man.”

“And you returned the favor,” I said. “We’re even.”

“Not even close,” Wade said. “Not even close.”

“So now what?” Taylor asked.

I looked down at my watch. The crystal was broken and its silver band was now scratched and tarnished. But it was still there. It had come through the battle, just like me. “There’s a phone back here,” I said. “You better call your parents. They’re worried sick about you. You too, Ostin.”

Ostin started to the phone but stopped. “But what about your mom?”

“I’m going to find her,” I said.

“We’re going to find her,” Jack said. “And bring her home.”

I looked at Jack and shook my head. “Thanks, but I’ve already gotten you guys in enough trouble. I can’t take that chance again.”

“Trouble?” Jack said. “You can’t buy this kind of excitement.”

“I’m in,” Wade said. “You risked your mom’s life for me, I’ll risk mine for hers. Besides, even that prison wasn’t as bad as living with my granny.” He looked at Jack. “The food was better.”

“The guards were nicer too,” Jack said.

I looked down and smiled. “Well, I could use a ride.”

“I’m in too,” Zeus said. “I helped capture her. I’ll help free her.” He looked at me. “What else am I going to do? Can’t stay here.”

“Count me in,” Ian said, stepping forward. “I can’t speak for the girls, but last I checked my schedule was wide open.” He looked at Abigail and

McKenna. “How about you guys?”

“I’m in,” McKenna said, smiling.

Abigail just looked down. She furtively wiped a tear from her cheek. “I’m sorry. I just want to go home.”

McKenna walked over and put her arm around her.

I looked at Abigail affectionately. “Go home, Abi. You’ve done enough. But I’ll forever be indebted to you.”

“As will I,” Taylor said.

“We all will,” Ian said. “We love you, Abi.”

Taylor walked over to the phone and picked up the receiver. She dialed three numbers, then stopped and looked back at me, smiling coyly. Then she set down the phone and walked over and took my hand.

“You, Michael Vey, are a freaking rock star.”

My eyes started twitching. “Thanks.”

She grinned. “Oh, now you start blinking. You had bombs blowing up around you, bullets shot at you, and two dozen armed bad guys trying to kill you and you’re a steely-eyed ninja, and now, when I take your hand, you’re nervous?”

I shrugged. “I can’t help it.”

She smiled. “I like that.” She leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. Then she wrapped her arms around me and we kissed again. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ostin giving me a thumbs-up. I could practically hear him. I knew what he was thinking without my powers. *Told you so, dude.*

The rest of the clan was smiling as well. When we parted, Taylor said, “Now let’s go get your mother.”

I leaned back. “Wait, Taylor. You can’t come.”

She put her hands on her hips. “If you think I’m going to let my boyfriend run off without me, you don’t know me.”

“But what about your parents?”

“I’ll call them.”

“What about cheerleading?”

She looked at me incredulously. “You’re joking, right? Save the world or shake pom-poms. How shallow do you think I am?”

I started to laugh. It was a pretty stupid thing to say.

Suddenly McKenna shouted out, “Michael, watch out!”

I spun around. No one had seen her enter. A girl I had never seen before was standing just fifteen feet from me. Zeus raised his hands and I immediately surged, knocking her back against the wall. She slid to the ground holding her arm. She cowered, her eyes averted.

“Please don’t hurt me.”

I stepped toward her. “Who are you?”

“She’s Grace,” Ian said. “She’s one of the seventeen.”

“You’re one of Hatch’s kids,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“I ran away from Hatch.”

“Careful,” Ostin said. “She could be a plant.”

“We’ll know soon enough. Taylor, see if it’s true.”

Taylor walked over and put her hands on the girl’s temples. Then she turned back to us. “It’s true. She hates Hatch.”

“I want to come with you,” she said.

“Come with me? Where do you think I’m going?”

“To find your mother. I know where she is.”

I looked over at Zeus. “What does she do?”

“No one was really sure,” Zeus said, “Something with computers.”

“I’m like a human flash drive,” Grace said. “I can download computers. I broke into the academy’s mainframe and downloaded all the information they have before they destroyed it all. You’re going to need it to finish what you started.”

I looked at her. “What do you mean, ‘what I’ve started’?”

Grace was still holding her arm as she stood. “This is just the beginning. The Elgen have built compounds all around the world. They’re already trying to create new electric children. If we don’t work together and stop them, they’ll hunt us all down individually and then they’ll take over.”

“It’s true,” Ian said. “None of us will be safe alone.” He turned to Abigail and frowned. “Even you, Abi.”

Abigail looked down. McKenna rubbed her back.

“Hatch never forgives and he never forgets,” Zeus said. “He’s like an elephant with anger management issues.”

In the center of the hallway Nichelle groaned.

“Whoa! That’s Nichelle,” Grace said, her voice tinged with fear.

“Sure is,” I said.

Taylor walked over to Nichelle’s side. “So what do we do with sunny delight?”

Nichelle’s eyes opened. Then she pulled her hair back from her face. For a moment she looked around the room, then the screeching and pain hit all of us. I immediately surged and Nichelle screamed out, “Okay, I’ll stop!”

“Ugh!” Taylor groaned, rubbing her forehead. “Girl, you are one bad apple. Rotten to the core.”

“I’d like to fry her like a corn dog,” Zeus said. “And be done with her.”

Nichelle looked up at me fearfully as I walked over to her. “No, I have something more fitting in mind. Something much worse.”

“Worse than lightning?” Taylor asked.

I nodded, looking in Nichelle’s face. “Look at her. She has nothing left. Her powers are now worthless, her so-called friends have abandoned her, and we’re not going to let her take a single thing from this place.” I crouched down and took the diamond collar off her neck.

“We’ll let her go back to the real world and live the rest of her life as a nobody.”

As the reality of my words sunk in her expression turned. “No,” she said. “Don’t do this. Shock me, Vey!”

I shook my head as I stood. “No. You’re on your own.”

Taylor walked over and took my hand.

Nichelle turned to Zeus. “Zeus, think of all the times I punished you! Finish me!”

Zeus folded his arms. “I’m done taking orders from you, Nichelle.”

“It’s time for you to leave, Nichelle,” I said. “Jack, would you escort her out? Make sure she doesn’t take anything with her.”

“Gladly.” He walked over and lifted Nichelle by her arm. She struggled futilely against his grasp.

“Let go of me, you creep! I hate you. I hate you all!”

Jack just grinned. “You’re not exactly BFF material yourself, sweetheart. Come on, Wade. Let’s show Little Miss Sunshine the real world.”

“Hurry back,” I said as they waited for the elevator. “We have plans to make.”

Jack smiled, raising his fist in the air in a power salute. “Go Electroclan.”

As the elevator door closed behind them, a large grin blanketed Ostin’s face. “Wow.”

“What?” I said.

“We’re buddies with Jack and Wade, we just freed an entire prison, and,” he glanced at Taylor, “Taylor Ridley’s your girlfriend . . .”

Taylor smiled. “. . . We’re definitely not in Idaho anymore.”

“That’s for sure,” I said.

He held out his hand. “Bones, dude.”

I held out my hand and this time it was without hesitation. “Bones.”

Taylor smiled and, for the first time, she held her hand out as well. “Bones.”

Ostin looked at Taylor and me, then around the room at each of our new friends. His smile grew wider. “You know what we have here, don’t you?”

“What?” I asked.

“It’s the rise of the Electroclan.”

THE END

COMING SOON

Book 2 of the Michael Vey series

MICHAEL VEY:

RISE OF THE ELECTROCLAN

Email your comments to author@richardpaulevans.com.

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RISE OF THE ELGEN

Sequel to the
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"Michael Vey: Rise of the Ampere" Excerpt

About Richard Paul Evans

*To McKenna
You have brought light and warmth into the world*



PROLOGUE



“**T**his had better be important,” the man said. It was past two in the morning in the Tyrrhenian Sea and the man on the boat had been awoken for the call.

“There’s been a . . . *hitch*,” Hatch said, choosing the word carefully. He leaned back in the leather seat of his private jet. “The transition from our Pasadena facility didn’t go as smoothly as we planned.”

“What kind of ‘hitch’?”

“We had a revolt.”

“A revolt? By who?”

“Michael Vey. And the GPs.”

“Did any of them escape?”

“All of them.”

The voice exploded in a string of profanities. “How did that come about?”

“The Vey boy was more powerful than we thought.”

“The Vey boy escaped?”

Hatch hesitated. “Not just Vey. We lost seven of the Glows.”

The man unleashed another string of profanities. “This is a disaster!”

“It’s a setback,” Hatch said. “One that will quickly be remedied. We know exactly where they are, and we’re gathering up the GPs as we speak. We’ve already recaptured all but three of them.”

“What if they’ve talked?”

“No one would believe them if they did. After what we’ve put them through, most of them are babbling idiots.”

“We can’t take that chance. Find them all. Where are the electric children?”

“We’ve been tracking their movements. They’re still together and driving to Idaho. We have a team in place ready to take them.”

“Why should I believe you’ll be successful this time?”

“*This* time we know what we’re dealing with. And we have a few surprises they won’t be expecting.”

“I’ll have to report this to the board,” the voice said.

“Give it until morning,” Hatch said. “The picture will be different. Besides, everything else is on schedule.”

“And I expect you to keep it that way.” The voice paused, then said, “I think it’s time you released Vey’s mother.”

“That would be a mistake. She’s our only guarantee that Vey won’t just disappear again, and he may be the answer to our problems with the machine. Besides, in less than twenty-four hours Vey and the rest of the Glows will be back in our custody.”

“You had better be right,” the man said.

“You have my guarantee,” Hatch said. “Vey will be back in our hands before the day’s out.”



PART ONE



In fifth grade my English teacher, Ms. Berg, was teaching about autobiographies and had us each write our life story on a single page of lined paper. I'm not sure which is more pathetic:

(a) That Ms. Berg thought our lives could be summed up on one page, or

(b) I could fill only half the page.

Let's face it, in fifth grade you're still kind of waiting for life to begin. Yeah, some of the kids had done cool things, like one had gone skydiving; another had been to Japan; and one girl's father was a plumber and she got to be in her dad's TV commercial waving a plunger, so she's kind of famous—but that's about as cool as it got. All I remember is that my autobiography was super lame. It went something like:

My name is Michael Vey, and I'm from a town you've never heard of—Meridian, Idaho. My father died when I was eight, and my mother and I have moved around a lot since then. I like to play video games. Also, I have Tourette's syndrome. I'm not trying to be funny, I really do.

You probably know that Tourette's makes some of us swear a lot, which would have made my story more interesting, or maybe got it banned, but I don't swear with my Tourette's. In my case, Tourette's just means I have a lot of tics, like I blink, gulp, make faces, stuff like that. That's about it. As far as life stories go, no one's called to buy the movie rights.

They might if they knew my secret—the secret I've hidden for most of my life and the reason my mom and I keep having to move.

I'm electric. So are you, of course. That's how your brain and muscles work. But the thing is, I have probably a thousand times more electricity than you. And it seems to be growing stronger. Have you ever rubbed your feet on a carpet, then shocked someone? Multiply that by a thousand and you'll get an idea of what it's like to be me. Or shocked by me. Fortunately, I've learned to control it.

I'm fifteen years old now and a lot has happened since the fifth grade. I kind of wish someone would ask me to write my life story now, because it would make a good movie. And it would take up *way* more than one page. This is how it would go:

My name is Michael Vey, and I'm more electric than an electric eel. I always thought I was the only one in the world like me, but I'm not. I just found out that there were originally seventeen of us. And the people who made us this way, the Elgen, are hunting us down. You might say we were an accident. The Elgen Corporation created a machine called the MEI (short for Magnetic Electron Induction), to be used for finding diseases and abnormalities in the body. Instead it created abnormalities—us.

My girlfriend, the way-out-of-my-league cheerleader with perfect brown eyes, Taylor Ridley, is also electric. I can shock people (I call it "pulsing"), but she can shock people's brains and make them forget what they were doing (she calls it "rebooting"). She can also read minds, but she has to touch you to do it.

One month ago the Elgen, led by a scary dude named Dr. Hatch, found us. They kidnapped Taylor and tried to get me, too, but ended

up with my mother instead. A few days later I went to California with my best friend, Ostin Liss (he and I live in the same apartment building, and he's one of the few people who knows about my powers), and a couple of kids from my school, Jack and Wade, to save Taylor and my mother.

Things didn't go so well. In the first place, Taylor was there but my mother wasn't. Then we got caught. Jack and Wade were forced to be GPs, which is short for human guinea pigs, the name the Elgen give their prisoners they experiment on. Ostin and I were locked up too, though I was put in Cell 25, the place they put people to break their minds.

I managed to escape and rescue my friends. I was also able to rescue four of the other electric kids: Zeus, Ian, McKenna, and Abigail. They have some pretty cool powers too. Zeus can shoot lightning bolts, which is why he's named after the Greek god. (But he can't touch water without shocking himself, so he doesn't bathe much—actually, never—so he kind of smells.)

Ian's blind but he can see way better than any of us. He sees the same way sharks and electric eels do, through electrolocation—which means he can see things that are miles away, even through walls.

McKenna can create light and heat from any part of her body.

Abigail can take away pain by electrically stimulating nerve endings.

We also rescued Grace. She was one of the electric kids who were loyal to Hatch (who calls us Glows). I don't know much about her other than that she can download things from computers and she downloaded all the information from the Elgen's mainframe before we escaped. We're hoping she has information on where the Elgen have taken my mother.

There are ten of us now (including our nonelectric friends Ostin, Jack, and Wade). We call ourselves the Electroclan.

There's one more thing I would put in my autobiography, something that scares me but would make my story more interesting. I don't know for sure, but I may be dying. Hatch told me that four of the electric children have already died of cancer caused by their electricity—and I have more electricity than any of them. I don't know if it's true because Hatch is a liar. I guess time will tell. In the meanwhile we're headed back to my home in Meridian, Idaho, to figure out where my mother is and plan our next move.

Like I said, I think my story would make a pretty good movie so far. Maybe it will be one day. But not yet, because it's not even close to being over. And I have a feeling that things are about to get a whole lot wilder.



“I am so freaking dead,” Ostin said, rubbing the palms of his hands on his head so hard I thought he’d leave bald patches. “My dad’s going to tear off my arms and beat me to death with them.”

I looked at Taylor, and she rolled her eyes. Ostin had been talking for hours about how excited he was to be home again, and it was only as we exited the highway into Meridian that it occurred to him that his parents would be angry that he’d run off without telling them.

“Relax,” I said. “They’ll be so happy to see you they’ll forget they’re mad. Besides, you’ve never even been grounded before.”

“I’ve never run away from home before either.”

“I’ll go with you,” Zeus said from the front seat. “I’ll be your wingman. If it gets ugly, I’ll take them down.”

Ostin’s eyes widened. “You can’t shock my parents.”

Zeus held his hands a few inches apart and arced electricity between them. “Sure I can. It’s easy.”

“I mean it’s *not okay* to shock them.”

Zeus blinked. “Why not?”

“They’re *my parents*,” Ostin said.

Zeus still looked confused. “Then Taylor can just reboot them until they forget who you are.”

“I’m not going to do that,” Taylor said.

“I don’t want them to forget who I am,” Ostin said.

Zeus shook his head. “Make up your mind. You want to get in trouble or not?”

“I don’t want to get in trouble *and* I don’t want to hurt them.”

“Sometimes you can’t eat your cake and have it too,” Zeus said.

“Technically,” Taylor said, “you can *never* eat your cake and have it too.”

“I wish I had some cake,” Ostin said, leaning his head against the back of the seat in front of him.

* * *

A few minutes later we passed the 7-Eleven where we’d started our journey, then turned into my apartment building’s parking lot. Jack put his Camaro in neutral and turned off the engine. “We’re here,” he said, even though it was kind of obvious.

“Where’s Wade?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Jack said. “Last time I saw him was about a half hour ago.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “He was supposed to stay with us.”

We’d left Pasadena with Jack’s car and one of the vans from the Elgen Academy, which Wade had driven with Ian, Abigail, Grace, and McKenna. Jack drove his Camaro with Taylor, Ostin, Zeus, and me.

Zeus sat up front with Jack and helped drive while the three of us crowded in the back, which, since I was next to Taylor, wasn’t the worst ride of my life. Around Barstow I fell asleep against her. When I woke up she whispered to me, “That was the strangest dream.”

“You had a strange dream?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “You did.”

It’s a weird thing sitting next to someone who can read your mind. At least she never has to wonder how I feel about her.

Our plan was to drive back to Idaho and hide at my apartment while we figured out how to rescue my mother from Hatch and the

Elgen. But first we needed to find out where she was. The Elgen are global, which means my mother could be anywhere in the world. *Anywhere.*

As I said, before we left Pasadena, Grace downloaded the Elgen computers. We were hoping that somewhere in all that information was my mother's whereabouts. All we needed now was a computer powerful enough to hold everything Grace had saved.

Fortunately, the Elgen didn't know where we were. At least I didn't think they did. I couldn't be certain about that either. The only thing I knew for sure was that I was going to rescue my mother—or die trying.



“I’m so dead,” Ostin said again.

“We got it, Ostin,” Taylor said. “Enough already.”

“If they don’t kill him, I might,” Zeus said.

I looked at Ostin. “I’ll come with you. They won’t kill you if I’m there. Besides, they’ll be impressed with how fit you look.” Not surprisingly, Ostin had lost a few pounds in the Elgen prison.

“Yeah,” Taylor said. “You’re looking good.”

Ostin’s frown vanished. “Really? You think so?”

“The Elgen diet.” Jack laughed. “Guaranteed to scare the fat away.”

“Yeah,” Zeus said. “Maybe you should go back and take the rest off.”

Ostin frowned again.

Zeus and Jack opened their doors and got out, followed by the rest of us.

Taylor stood next to me in the parking lot. “Where do you think Wade went?”

I glanced back at the road. “I don’t know. But it worries me.”

Jack shook his head. “I’m going to pound him when he gets here. He knew he wasn’t supposed to leave us.”

“Maybe something happened,” Taylor said.

“Yeah, maybe the Elgen captured them,” Ostin said. “Or the van had a self-destruct mechanism.”

Taylor frowned. “Or maybe they just got a flat. And besides, they have Ian with them.”

With Ian aboard they were less likely to run into a trap than we were. His ability to see through solid objects had saved us more than once.

“I’m sure there’s an explanation,” I said, trying to sound calm. *Wait to worry*, I told myself. *Wait to worry*. I felt my face twitch. I could pretend to be calm, but stress always makes my Tourette’s act up.

* * *

It was nearly fifteen minutes before Wade pulled the white Elgen van into the parking lot. He drove up next to Jack’s Camaro and rolled down his window. “Hey,” he said. “We’re here.”

Jack walked up to him and smacked him on the head.

“Ow!” Wade said. “Why’d you do that?”

“Where’d you go?” Jack asked. “You weren’t supposed to leave us.”

“The girls made me stop for doughnuts!”

“You wanted one too,” one of the girls said from the back.

“I hope you got some for us,” Ostin said.

“Sorry, man,” Wade said. “We ate them all.”

“They were *way* good,” Abigail said.

“Thanks for sharing,” Ostin said.

Everyone climbed out of the van.

“So this is Idaho,” Abigail said, stretching her arms above her head.

“Isn’t this where they make potatoes?”

“*Grow* potatoes,” Ostin said. “You don’t *make* potatoes.”

“You make french-fried potatoes,” she replied.

Ostin shook his head.

Just then Ian said, “We’re being watched.”

I looked around but didn’t see anyone. “Who’s watching us?”

“There’s a guy in the apartment building across the street with a telescope pointed right at us. I don’t think he’s seen us yet. He’s sitting at the table eating a sandwich. But he’s almost finished.”

“What do we do?” Jack asked me.

“Is he alone?” I asked Ian.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s find out what he’s doing here. Ostin, take my key and get everyone in my apartment. Taylor, Zeus, Jack, and Ian, come with me.”

While Ostin, Wade, Abigail, Grace, and McKenna went to my apartment, the rest of us ran across the street. Inside the building I asked Ian, “Which apartment is he in?”

“He’s on the third floor. I don’t know which apartment, I’ll have to look.”

We quickly climbed the stairs. As we walked down the hallway, Ian commented on what he saw behind the walls, talking as if the residents could hear him. “Excuse me . . . Excuse me . . . Use a grenade jump . . . Don’t eat that . . . Really, dude? Use a tissue. Oh, that’s just nasty.”

At apartment 314 Ian said, “There he is, he’s back at his telescope. He just noticed the van. He’s taking out his phone. Now he’s dialing someone.”

“Taylor, can you reboot him?” I asked.

“I’ll try. Ian, where is he?”

Ian pointed left of the door. “Straight through there.”

Taylor put her head up against the wall and concentrated.

“It worked,” Ian said. “He put the phone down.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“He looks like he’s thinking.”

I tried the doorknob. “It’s locked.”

Ian examined the door. “Dead bolted and chained.”

Zeus said, “Ring the doorbell and when he opens we’ll shock him.”

“There’s a peephole,” Taylor said. “He won’t open the door with all of us standing here.”

“He’s dialing again,” Ian said.

Taylor focused again.

“Got him,” Ian said.

“You’re right,” I said to Taylor. “But if it’s just you standing here, he’ll open. Everyone against the wall.”

Taylor looked at me. “What am I supposed to say when he answers?”

“You’ll think of something. Just get him to open the door.” I looked back. “Everyone ready?”

Jack nodded. “Bring it on.”

I rang the doorbell.

A few seconds later, Ian said, “He’s coming. He’s got a gun.”

Taylor looked at me fearfully.

“Is he holding it?” I asked.

“No,” Ian said. “It’s in his holster.”

The peephole darkened. Then a gruff voice asked, “Who is it?”

We all looked at Taylor.

“Uh, good afternoon. I’m selling Girl Scout Cookies.”

“Girl Scout Cookies?” I mouthed. Taylor shrugged.

“Not interested,” the man said.

“He’s leaving,” Ian said.

Just then the door across the hall from us opened. An old man wearing a brown terry cloth robe scowled at us. “What are you kids up to?”

Before I could answer, Zeus zapped him. The man dropped to the ground like a bowling ball.

“You didn’t have to shock him,” Taylor said.

“What was I supposed to do?” Zeus said.

I put my ear to the man’s chest to make sure he was okay. “His heart’s still beating. Jack, help me get him back inside.”

We dragged the man into his apartment, then shut the door behind us.

“The dude’s back at the window,” Ian said.

“Got him,” Taylor said, rebooting him. She turned to me. “Let’s try again. I think I’ve got something better this time.”

I rang the doorbell.

“He’s coming,” Ian said.

We all leaned back against the wall.

“You’re gulping,” Taylor said to me.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“Who’s there?” the man asked.

“Hatch sent me,” Taylor said coolly.

“Who?”

“Hatch.”

There was a slight pause, then the man began sliding the dead bolt. Jack leaned forward, ready to charge the door.

Suddenly the man stopped. “You’re not supposed to use that name,” he said. “How do I know you’re with Hatch?”

Taylor swallowed. “How else would I know where you were?”

“What’s the password?”

“The password?” Taylor said. She looked at me.

“Taylor,” Ian whispered. “He’s touching the doorknob.”

“Oh,” she said slowly, “the password.” She grabbed the doorknob and concentrated. “It’s . . . it’s . . . Idaho.”

There was a short, silent pause, then the man said, “All right.” He finished unlocking the dead bolt. As he started to open the door, Jack rushed against it, knocking the man backward. The guy reached for his gun, but Zeus zapped him. The shock knocked Jack down as well.

“Man,” Jack said, climbing to his knees. “Watch where you point that thing.”

“Sorry,” Zeus said.

We all scrambled inside, locking the door behind us. I knelt down next to the man. He was tall with a black mustache and beard. “Taylor, come see what they’re up to.”

Taylor crouched down next to me, put her hands on the man’s temples, then closed her eyes. After a moment she said, “He’s just the lookout. There are six Elgen guards waiting for us in one of the apartments across the street.”

“Which apartment?”

“Just a minute.” She touched him again. “One-seventeen.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“That’s not good,” I said.

“What’s wrong with one-seventeen?” Zeus asked.

“That’s Ostin’s place.”



“**W**hat do we do with him?” Taylor asked, looking down at the guard. “We can’t just leave him here. If he wakes up he’ll warn the others.”

I took his cell phone and pulsed. The phone lit up, then burned out, a wisp of smoke rising from its keypad. “He won’t be using that again,” I said, tossing the phone aside.

“He can still come after us,” Ian said.

“We’ll tie him up,” I said. “Taylor, see if you can find some rope or something.”

“Ian,” Taylor said. “Help me look.”

“Always using the blind guy to find your stuff,” Ian said.

I stayed close to the man, prepared to pulse if he suddenly roused. A couple of minutes later Taylor and Ian returned.

“Found something,” Taylor said, holding up a roll of silver duct tape. “Who wants it?”

“I’ll do it,” Jack said, kneeling down next to me. Taylor tossed him the tape, and Jack rolled the man over onto his stomach, then pulled his arms around to his back. “Hey, Zeus, make yourself useful and hold his arms.”

Zeus pinned the guy's arms to his back while Jack wound the tape around his wrists and hands until they were cocooned. When he had finished, Jack looked at me and grinned. "He's not getting out of that."

"What about his legs?" I asked.

"That's next. Lift 'em, Zeus."

Zeus lifted the man's legs as Jack wrapped the tape around them.

"Save some for his mouth," Taylor said.

"I have plenty for his mouth," Jack said. He wrapped the last of the tape around the man's head, covering his mouth and eyes.

"Don't cover his nose," Taylor said. "He'll suffocate."

"I wasn't going to," Jack said.

I looked at the man. "No way he's getting out of that."

"My brothers did that to me once," Taylor said.

"Did what?" I asked.

"Wrapped me up in duct tape like a mummy. I was only seven. When they were done they went out to play and forgot about me for like four hours. They only remembered me when my mom asked them at dinner if they knew where I was. She was furious when she found me. They got grounded for two weeks."

"I would have shocked them silly," Zeus said.

"I wish I had known how to reboot people back then," Taylor said.

"I was just figuring things out."

"Michael!" Ian said. "Ostin's walking to his apartment."

"What a time to get brave," I said. "Taylor, can you stop him?"

"All the way across the street?"

"Just try," I said.

She closed her eyes.

"Nothing," Ian said.

"It's too far," Taylor said.

"You need to eat more bananas," Zeus said. "The potassium in them will strengthen your powers."

"Come on," I said. "We've got to stop him."

"What about the old man across the hall?" Taylor asked.

"We'll be long gone before he wakes up. Maybe he'll think he dreamed it."

* * *

We raced out of the building and across the street. When we entered my apartment building Ostin was still standing in front of his apartment door, getting up the nerve to walk inside. He slowly reached for the handle.

“Ostin!”

He turned and looked at me. “What?”

Taylor put her finger over her lips. “Shhh.”

I motioned him over.

He looked at us quizzically, then walked toward us. “What?”

Taylor shushed him again. I pushed him into my apartment, and everyone else followed.

When we were inside, Ostin asked, “What are you doing?”

“We’re saving you,” Jack said.

“From my parents?”

“No,” I said. “There are six guards in your apartment.”

“With my parents?”

Ian shook his head. “They’re not there. Not unless they’re dressed like Elgen guards.”

Ostin turned pale. “They took my mom and dad?”

“We don’t know that,” I said. “But we’ve got to get out of here before the guards find out we’re here. Ian, what are they doing?”

“Four of them are watching television. One’s in the bathroom. The other’s reading.”

“Is anyone near the front window?”

“The guy with the magazine is.”

“Then we better go out the back.”

“Wade and I will get the cars and drive them around back,” Jack said. “C’mon, Wade.” He opened the window and climbed out.

“We can’t just leave my parents,” Ostin said.

“Your parents aren’t here,” Ian said.

“Then we need to find out where they are!”

“How?” Zeus asked.

For the first time that I could remember, Ostin didn’t have an answer. “Well, they’ll know.”

“The guards?” Taylor said. “Sure, let’s go ask them. They’ll be happy to tell us.”

Ostin looked down.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “If the Elgen took them, we’ll find them. But if we get caught . . .”

“I know,” he said.

A moment later the cars arrived around back. Zeus and the four girls climbed out the window, followed by Ian and Ostin. After everyone was gone I looked around my apartment. In the excitement of our return I hadn’t let the emotion of being back home sink in. Over the last few weeks I had honestly wondered if I’d ever see my home again. But now that I was back, it didn’t feel like home. Not without my mom.

I picked up a framed photograph of the two of us from the hutch next to the kitchen counter—a picture of us on the Splash Mountain ride at Disneyland. We had gotten soaked, and my mother had bought me a new T-shirt to wear. I still had the shirt even though it didn’t fit anymore. My mother had sacrificed a lot for us to go on that trip. It was less than a year after my father died, and I think she was trying to make me feel okay again. She was always worried about me. I had no doubt that even now she still was.

Would our lives ever be normal again—the way they were before I knew about Hatch and Glows and the Elgen? After what we’d been through it was hard to imagine sitting at the kitchen table while my mother made waffles and talked about normal things like school and movies: the things other people talked about.

Ostin interrupted my thoughts, leaning in through the window. “Michael. We have to go. Everyone’s waiting.”

“Sorry.” I slid the photograph from the frame, folded it into my front pocket, then climbed out the window, pulling it shut behind me.

Ostin was still standing there. He looked scared.

“You okay?” I asked.

“They took my parents.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “If they did, we’ll find them. I promise. Everything will be okay.”

I didn't really know if what I'd said was true, but just saying the words helped me believe they might come true. We checked to make sure no one was watching, then ran to Jack's car.



“**A**ny idea where to go?” I asked Jack as I slammed the car door.

“We can go to my place,” he said.

Jack’s house sounded as good a place to hide as any—especially since I couldn’t think of anywhere else. “Great,” I said. “Your place.”

“Don’t mind my old man,” he said. “He drinks sometimes.” He rolled down his car’s window, then pounded on his door to get Wade’s attention. “We’re going to my house.”

“Got it,” Wade said.

Jack drove around to the front of the building, waited for a car to pass, then pulled out into the street with Wade following closely behind.

* * *

Jack lived on the other side of Meridian High School, about two miles from my apartment. The last time I’d been to his house was when I had gone to ask him for a ride to Pasadena. I wondered how many times since then he’d regretted saying yes.

As we pulled down the road to his house, Jack suddenly shouted, “No!”

It took me a moment to understand what was wrong. But when I saw it, my heart froze. Jack’s house had burned to the ground.

Jack hit the gas and sped down the street, slamming on the brakes in front of what was left of the house. He pulled his parking brake and jumped out.

At first, none of us said anything. Then Taylor said softly, “Do you think it was an accident?”

I put a hand on my face to stop my jaw from ticking. “No.”

“It’s no accident,” Zeus said. “The Elgen love fires. It hides their tracks.”

I got out of the car and walked to Jack’s side. His hands were balled up in fists and his face was tight and angry. All that was left of his house were the concrete sidewalk and foundation. Even the cars in the yard had been torched. The area was cordoned off with yellow caution tape.

“I’m sure your dad got out,” I said.

Jack thrust his hands deep into his pockets. “Unless he was drunk. Like he usually is.”

I didn’t know what to say, so finally I just settled on “I’m so sorry.” My words sounded ridiculously inadequate. “This is my fault.”

“Did you set fire to my house?” Jack asked.

“No. I just never should have gotten you involved.”

“I made my choices,” Jack said. “I’ll stand by them.” He turned to me. “It’s not your fault; it’s Hatch’s. And he’s gonna pay.”

* * *

We stood there for another minute or so without speaking, the only sound was the whisper of a late afternoon breeze. Then I turned and walked back to the car. As I climbed in I looked back at Taylor. She was clearly frightened.

“Is he okay?” she asked.

I shook my head.

Jack returned a few minutes later. After he'd shut the door Zeus said, "Sorry, man."

Jack just grunted.

Then Taylor said, "I need to go home."

I turned to her. "If they were watching my place, Ostin's, and Jack's, you can bet they're going to be watching yours, too."

"I don't care!" she said. "I need to see my house."

"Taylor, think about it. If they capture us, your parents won't have a chance. The best thing we can do for them is be careful."

She turned away from me angrily.

"I'm sorry," I said.

After a moment she replied, "I know."

Jack started the car. Then he said, "We can drive by and see if Taylor's house is okay. If everyone stays down, they probably won't know it's us."

Taylor thought about this, then said, "Okay."

"Then we can go to my sister's place," he said. "She has a tanning salon about a mile and a half from here. She'll let us hide out." Then he said in a softer voice, "Maybe she'll know what happened to my dad." He looked back. "Any objections?"

Going by Taylor's house was risky, but she was so upset I couldn't bring myself to say no. "Let's go," I said.

Jack pulled his car around until his and Wade's windows were adjacent to each other. "Head over to my sister's tanning salon, we'll meet you there."

"Where are you going?" Wade asked. He looked as shocked as we did.

"It doesn't matter," Jack said. "Just go."

"Shouldn't we stick together?"

"No," Jack said, and rolled up his window. He turned back to Taylor. "Where do you live?"

"Behind the school," she said.

Taylor lived only a few minutes away, and none of us said a word the whole way over. As Ostin liked to say, the tension was as thick as good bacon. I knew Taylor was afraid of what she might find. *What if her house was burned down too?*

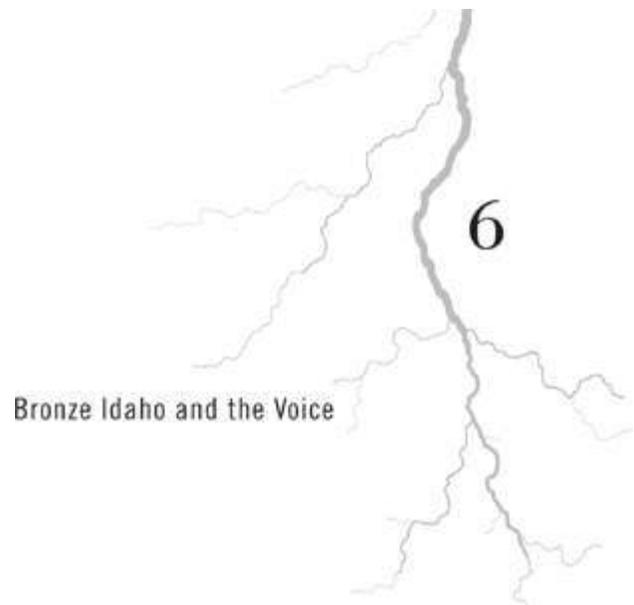
Jack turned onto her street, driving a little below the speed limit to avoid drawing attention to us. Ostin and I crouched down in the back, though I could still see out. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Taylor's house. Everything looked normal, though I noticed a white van with tinted windows parked at the end of the street. Taylor stared silently as we drove by.

After we had passed, Taylor said, "I think I saw my mom." There was longing in her voice. And pain. But at least she wasn't so afraid anymore.

"Seen enough?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Taylor said softly. "Thank you."

He picked up speed and headed off to his sister's tanning salon.



There are people in this world you don't really picture as having a sister, like, for instance, Hitler. (However, Ostin told me that Hitler did have a sister, named Paula.) Jack was one of those people. I wondered what Jack's sister would be like and how she'd respond to us all showing up at her tanning salon. I remembered what Jack had said about her on our way to California—that she didn't really associate with the rest of his family anymore. Maybe she'd throw us out. Where would we go then? And what if Jack's father was dead?

We drove to a small strip mall and pulled into the parking space next to Wade. The sign on the building in front of us read:

BRONZE IDAHO TANNING SALON

A red-and-blue neon sign in the salon's front window flashed OPEN.

Wade started getting out of the van, but Jack stopped him. "You guys better stay here for a minute. I need to make sure my sister's cool."

"Okay," Wade said. "We'll keep watch."

The rest of us followed Jack through the front door. The salon's lobby was decorated in a Hawaiian motif, with amateurishly painted palm trees and hula girls on the walls and thatch covering the front counter.

The woman standing at the front desk looked up as we entered. She was a female version of Jack, though she was much smaller, maybe only an inch taller than Taylor. She had long, blond hair accented with a violet streak, and a nose ring and multiple ear piercings. Not surprisingly, she was very tan.

"Hey, sis," Jack said.

"Jack," she said, her surprise at seeing him evident in her voice. "Where have you been?" She looked at the rest of us with a confused expression, then came around the counter and hugged her brother.

After they separated, Jack said, "I just came from the house, or what's left of it. Where's Dad?"

I held my breath.

"He's staying with me until he can find an apartment," she said.

Jack's expression relaxed. I breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Where have you been?" she asked again.

"California."

"Who are these people?"

"Friends of mine," he said. "We need a place to hide out."

Her expression changed from curiosity to anger. "Hide out? What have you done?"

"Nothing," Jack said. "We haven't done anything wrong."

She looked at me and I nodded in confirmation.

"Then why are you hiding?"

"It's a long story," Jack said. "And the less you know the better. We just need a place to hang until we figure out what we're going to do."

She looked at him for a moment, then said, "Okay. But you can't stay up front. I've got a business to run. And you owe me an explanation."

Just then the front door opened and a tall, professionally dressed woman walked in. She looked around at us. "Excuse me, are you all in line?" she asked Taylor.

"No," Taylor said. "We're just visiting. We'll get out of your way."

“May I help you?” Jack’s sister asked.

“Yes,” she said, walking up to the counter. “Do you have a tanning bed available?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Great,” she said. “Do you have one a little more private—perhaps something near the back?”

“Yes. The last room has the Ultra Ruva bed. It’s one of our best. Are you a member of our executive tanning club?”

“No. I’m just traveling through town.”

“Very good. How long would you like me to set your session for?”

“Twenty minutes should be sufficient.”

“Twenty it is.” She handed the woman a key with a large key chain—a pineapple-shaped piece of plywood with the number six painted on it. “You’re in room six. Just push the start button on the bed when you’re ready.”

“Thank you. Do you have lotion?”

“We have Coppertone and Beach Bum.”

“Coppertone will be fine,” the woman replied. She suddenly turned and looked at me, her gaze lingering a little longer than was comfortable. I twitched a couple of times.

“Here you go,” Jack’s sister said, handing her a bottle of lotion. “Cash or credit?”

“Cash. How much is it?”

“With the lotion it’s twenty-nine dollars.”

The woman handed her a couple of bills. “Keep the change,” she said, stepping away from the counter. As she walked past me she dropped her cell phone on the ground near my feet. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said.

“No problem.” I bent over and picked it up. “Here you go.”

She made no effort to take the phone from me. “That’s not mine.”

I looked at her quizzically. “But, you just . . .”

“I believe it’s yours, Michael.” She looked right into my eyes, then handed me the tanning room key along with two other keys. “Take these into the room. Someone needs to talk to you.”

My chest constricted. “Are you with Hatch?”

She touched her finger to her lips to silence me. "Room six," she said. "Turn on the tanning bed. I'll watch the door." She patted her jacket, making me think she was carrying a gun. I looked over at the others. No one was paying attention to me except Ostin. I could tell he was trying to figure out what was going on.

"Hurry," she said. "We haven't much time."

I looked back into her eyes. Something about her seemed trustworthy. "Okay," I said.

"Room six. Don't forget to turn on the bed when you get inside."

I walked back to the room and stepped inside, shutting the door behind me. I turned on the tanning bed and the sound of the machine filled the room. The phone she had given me rang immediately. I raised it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hello, Michael. Are you alone?" The man's voice was deep and grave.

"Who is this?"

"One of the few people in this world who knows what you're up against. They're following everything you're doing."

"Who is?"

"You know who. We don't have much time. If we can find you, so can they. Now listen to what I say and follow my directions precisely. You have to leave immediately. As soon as you get in your car I'll text you an address. Drive directly to that location and abandon your vehicles. The Elgen van you borrowed has a tracking device, and I'm sure that by now they've identified your friend's Camaro."

"How do you know this?"

"I haven't time to explain," the voice said.

"How do I know this isn't another trap?"

"You don't. But think about it, if we wanted to capture you, we would have just done it. The building you're in right now is a death trap. It only has two exits, the front glass door and a back door that leads to a narrow alley. You're sitting ducks. You have to trust me. If you want to escape the Elgen, you're going to need our help."

"Why would you help us?"

"We have our reasons. And we know even better than you what the Elgen are planning and what they're capable of. The Elgen are rising.

You should also know that there are more electric children. And they have terrible powers—worse than anyone you’ve met so far.”

“Great,” I said.

“You can defeat them, Michael. You might not be strong enough to face them today, but by the time you do, and trust me, you will, you’ll be ready. But you’ll need to act quickly to stop them.”

“But we did stop them. We shut down the academy.”

“They were going to close it anyway—you just sped up their timetable. I wish we had more time, but that’s a luxury neither of us has, so try to understand what I’m saying. Now is the opportune moment to strike. The Elgen are divided. To most of its board members, it is just a business. To Hatch, and a few others, it’s more. Much more. They’re building a secret society, and they’re growing fast. They’ve made inroads in government, police, and military. If you don’t believe me, check the state records to see what happened to the man who robbed your mother.”

“What happened to him?”

“He’s not a worry to the Elgen anymore.”

“How do I know you’re not one of them?”

“Like I said, you’re going to have to trust a little. I won’t ask more of you than that.”

“If we ditch our cars, how will we get around?”

“Where you leave your cars, there will be two other vehicles. My associate gave you the keys.”

I looked down at the keys in my hand.

“I’ve programmed the address of a safe house into the GPS system of the yellow vehicle. Go there and wait for my call. But you must leave now. The police are already on their way to the salon.”

“The police? Why?”

“To arrest you for burning down Jack’s house.”



The phone went dead as the man hung up. I put it in my front pocket and walked quickly out of the room. Apparently Jack's sister hadn't made everyone go to the back, because they were all still in the lobby. The strange woman was gone.

I walked up to Jack, who was talking to his sister. "We've got to go," I said. "Fast. The police are on their way."

"How do you know that?" he asked.

I looked at the others, who were now all looking at me. "I just do."

"Who was that lady?" Ostin asked. It was the first thing he'd said since we'd left the apartment.

"I'll tell you in the car," I said. "We've got to hurry."

"Why don't we just wait for the police?" Taylor said. "They'll help us."

"No. They're coming to arrest us."

"Arrest us for what?" Ostin asked.

"We stole a van, Einstein," Jack said.

"It's worse," I said. "Someone told them that I burned down your house."

Jack frowned. "We've got to get out of here."

“You stole a car?” Jack’s sister asked angrily. “You said you didn’t do anything.”

“We borrowed it,” Zeus said. “And they owed us big-time.”

She looked flustered. “What’s going on, Jack? Why are the police coming?”

“I can’t tell you right now. Just tell them that you don’t know anything.”

“I don’t,” she said.

“Good. It’s better that way.” He looked at her sadly. “We’ve gotta run. I’ll explain when I can.”

“C’mon, everyone,” I said. “To the car.”

* * *

When we were in the Camaro, Jack asked, “Now what?”

“I have an address,” I said. I picked up the phone, but it was out of power. “I can’t believe it, it’s dead. It was perfectly fine a minute ago.”

“Let me see it,” Ostin said. He took the phone from me and examined it. “You just need to hold it.”

“I was.”

“Put out your hand,” he said. He handed me the phone and this time it lit up.

“You were holding it wrong. See these metallic strips on the side? They’re made of a silver alloy. The phone is designed to run off your electricity. That way it never runs out.”

“And it won’t work for anyone else,” I said. I looked down at the address the man had texted me. “Thirty-eight South Malvern Avenue.”

“I know that area,” Jack said. “It’s an industrial park. There are a lot of printing shops.” Jack shouted to Wade, “Follow me!” Then he backed up and screeched out of the parking lot, followed by Wade, who also tried to screech but managed only a small chirp.

After we’d driven a few blocks, Taylor asked, “What’s going on, Michael? And who was that woman?”

“I don’t know who she was. But she knows who we are and who’s chasing us.”

“She knew about the Elgen?” Ostin asked.

I nodded. "She gave me the phone. A man called who says he's going to help us. He also told me that the van Wade's driving has a tracking device. That's how they've been following us. We need to ditch our cars."

"Wait a minute," Jack said. "No one said anything about ditching my car."

"Who is this man?" Taylor asked.

"Just . . . some man." I looked at her. "I know it sounds stupid, but I believe he's trying to help."

"I'm not ditching my car," Jack said.

"How do you know you can trust him?" Taylor asked.

"I don't. But do we have a choice?"

"Yes," she said, "we do."

I took her hand. "Here, read my mind. Listen to what he said."

She closed her eyes as I thought back on the call. When she opened her eyes she nodded. "Okay. I trust him too."

Jack was still upset. "You're saying that some dude I've never met wants me to ditch my car? I'm not ditching my car."

"They want us to *trade* cars."

"That's not going to happen," he said. "Do you know what this baby is worth?"

"The Elgen are following your car. They can either capture you and the car, or just the car. It's your call."

Jack shook his head. "This just keeps getting better."

* * *

We had driven about a half mile from the salon when two Meridian Police cars sped past us headed in the opposite direction. Their lights were flashing but there were no sirens.

"There they go," Jack said. "Looks like your man knows something."

"Maybe he's the one who called the police," Ostin said.

Possible, I thought.

The address on my cell phone led us to an abandoned industrial area near an automotive wrecking yard. I was nervous and twitching. I'm pretty certain everyone was nervous, because no one was talking. I

looked over at Jack. His face was tight and his eyes were darting back and forth, searching for danger. The yard was surrounded by a tall fence topped with razor wire, and the sun had nearly set, leaving the yard dark.

“I don’t like this place,” Taylor said.

“Not a lot of escape options,” Jack said slowly. “Keep your eyes peeled.”

There was a loud snap of electricity from Zeus, and we all jumped. “Sorry,” he said. “Just keeping sharp.”

I did my best to control my tics. “I told Ian to have Wade honk if he sees anything that looks like a trap,” I said.

We slowly drove around the corner of a weathered, aluminum-sided warehouse. There, next to a Dumpster, were two brand-new Hummers, one yellow, the other black.

Jack’s expression changed when he saw the vehicles. “That’s what they’re giving us to drive?”

“Must be,” I said. “I don’t see any other cars.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” he said. “I’ll trade.”

We pulled up to the parked vehicles, and everyone got out of the cars.

“Are we safe?” I asked Ian.

“As far as I can tell. The only person around is a homeless guy sleeping in a Dumpster behind the building across the street.”

I handed Wade a key. “You take the black Hummer. Follow us.”

“Where are we going?” Wade asked.

“A safe house,” I said.

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

“I’m not sure about anything,” I said, “except that the Elgen are hunting us and we just got some new cars.”

Wade nodded. “Works for me.”

“We’re trading places,” I said to Zeus, climbing into the front seat of the yellow Hummer.

“No problem,” he said. “I’ll sit next to Tara.”

“Taylor,” Taylor said.

“Sorry,” Zeus said, sliding in next to her. “I keep confusing you with your evil twin.”

“Well, you were with her a lot longer than you were with me.”

Jack was in the driver’s seat checking out the console. I handed him the key.

“Listen to that,” he said, starting it up. “I’ve always wanted to drive one of these bad boys. My brother drove one in Iraq.”

“Cool,” I said.

“It was blown up underneath him by an IED.”

“Not cool,” I said.

“He survived, so it’s even more cool. Where to?”

“The man said they programmed an address into the GPS system.” I looked at the device. “I have no idea how this works. Ostin?”

Ostin leaned forward over the seat. He pushed a few buttons and a map appeared. “There are your coordinates,” he said. “Just follow the arrow.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You good, Jack?”

Jack put the Hummer in gear. “I’m good.”

As we pulled back out onto the street, Jack turned to me and said, “Hope it’s not a trap.”

I leaned back in my seat. “Me too,” I said softly. “Me too.”



According to the GPS our next destination was 7.3 miles from where we had picked up the cars, a distance we covered in less than fifteen minutes. The safe house was a small, ordinary-looking brick home in an ordinary suburban neighborhood. The yard was manicured enough not to warrant complaints, but simple enough not to warrant attention. The house was dark except for the front porch light.

Jack pulled into the cement driveway on the west side of the house. The drive was narrow but widened in back at the entrance of a two-car garage.

"I'll wait to pull in," Jack said. "In case we need to make a quick getaway."

"Good idea," I said, trying not to sound nervous. I realized that part of me was waiting for the worst to happen and I was ticking like crazy.

Wade pulled the black Hummer up next to us. In spite of our situation, he was grinning from ear to ear. "This baby is sweet," he said. "I never thought I'd get to ride in one of these, let alone drive one."

"I'm going to check things out," I said to Jack. "If it's a trap, just get everyone out of here."

“Warriors don’t leave a man behind,” Jack said.

“What are we doing?” Wade asked.

“Just keep your car running until we’re sure it’s safe,” I said. I turned to Ian. “Can you give me a hand?”

“Sure, man. I’ll give you both of them.”

“It’s your eyes I need.”

“I’ll give you both of those, too.”

The two of us got out of the cars and walked to the edge of the driveway, looking cautiously at the dark house.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“It’s empty,” Ian said. He looked around at the neighbors. “Neighborhood looks legit. A mom helping a kid with homework, a family watching TV, a couple eating dinner.”

“All right, let’s go in.” I rapped on the Hummer, and Jack pulled into the garage, followed by Wade. Everyone gathered in the driveway.

Taylor came up to my side. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“You’re ticking a lot.”

“I’m nervous.”

“But the house is okay?”

“It checked out with Ian.”

We walked up to the back of the house, but as I reached for the storm door Ostin said, “Stop!”

I looked over at him.

“What if the door’s booby-trapped? I saw this show where the bad guys had rigged all the doors with plastic explosives, so when the cops opened the door—ka-boom!” Ostin threw his arms out in demonstration. “Everyone’s dead.”

We all just looked at him.

Ostin shrugged. “It was a cool show.”

“I’ll open the door,” Zeus said. He twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open, then stepped inside the dark house. “Hey, McKenna, how about a hand?”

“Sure.” She lit up her hand, then stepped into the house behind him.

“There’s the switch,” Zeus said.

Taylor and I walked in, followed by everyone else. Jack was the last to enter. He still looked anxious and glanced around before shutting and locking the door.

The home's interior was as ordinary looking as its exterior, which, I suppose, is what a safe house is supposed to look like. I mean, if the place stands out like a zit on your nose, it's not going to be very safe, right?

We were standing in the kitchen. On the counter was a bulky, brown envelope, and I picked it up and pulled back its flap. It was filled with money.

"Check this out," I said, holding up the cash. "They left us money."

"That's some serious coinage," Jack said.

"I'll count it," Taylor said, taking the envelope from me. She riffled through the bills. "Ten grand," she said. "Even."

"That was fast," I said.

"I'm good at counting."

I took a handful of bills and put them in my pocket, leaving the rest on the counter.

From the front room Ostin shouted, "Michael, check this out! This is one sweet computer."

I walked into the other room. I was no expert on computers—I left that to Ostin—but it looked like a serious piece of technology. "Can we use it to get the data out of Grace?" I asked.

"I'm on it," he replied.

I was glad he had found something to distract him from his parents.

"Is there anything to eat?" Taylor asked. "I'm really hungry."

"Me too," Abigail said.

I opened the fridge. It was empty. "Nada."

"We passed a pizza place about a half mile back," Jack said. "Wade and I could go pick up something. What kind of pizza do you guys want?"

"Pepperoni and anchovies," Wade said.

"No anchovies," Taylor said. "They stink."

"I second that," Ostin said. "Who eats anchovies on pizza?"

"Only about a billion Italians," Wade replied. "And they're the ones who invented pizza, so they should know how to eat them."

Getting a history lesson from Wade, especially about food, was more than Ostin could stomach. “In the first place,” Ostin said, standing, “no one knows who invented pizza. In the sixth century, Persian soldiers baked bread flat on their shields and covered it with cheese and dates. So you could argue that they did. Secondly, there are not a billion Italians in the world, not even a hundred million. In Italy there are—”

“Agh!” Wade shouted. “Will someone shove something into his mouth to shut him up?”

“Pizza would do nicely,” Ostin said. “Without anchovies.”

“Just get a bunch of different kinds,” I said to Jack. “There are ten of us. How about three large?”

“I’ll get some drinks, too,” Jack said. “Everyone’s good with cola?”

“I want lemonade,” Taylor said.

“Me too,” said Abigail.

“Diet cola,” McKenna said.

“Write that down,” Jack said to Wade.

Wade looked around. “With what?”

“Then remember it,” Jack said. “All right, I’ll be back. But not too soon. I need to test out the Hummer.”

“Can I come?” Abigail asked.

Jack looked pleasantly surprised. “Sure.”

“Thanks.”

Taylor looked at me and grinned. Jack had told us earlier that he thought Abigail was hot.

“Wade,” Jack said, “you don’t need to come anymore.”

“What?”

“Abi and I can handle it. Just chill here with everyone else.”

“He can come,” Abigail said.

“No,” Jack said. “He doesn’t want to.” He looked at Wade with a threatening glare. “Do you?”

Wade frowned. “Nah, I’ll just chill.”

“Let’s go,” Jack said, opening the door.

“Okay, we’ll be right back,” Abigail said.

After they left I said, “C’mon, Ostin. Let’s start uploading.” I looked at Grace. “Are you okay with that?”

She nodded. "That's what I do."

Ostin powered up the computer, then turned to Grace. "So how do you transfer data?"

"First I need to touch a metal part on the computer." She glanced back at us. "I should sit down. Bringing it up is hard."

"Hard?" Taylor asked. "In what way?"

"I guess it's sort of like vomiting," Grace said.

"Oh," Taylor said.

Grace put both hands on the computer and began concentrating. Suddenly her eyes rolled back in her head and she began trembling.

"Holy cannoli," Ostin said. "Look at that."

Files suddenly began filling the screen. Grace continued until a screen popped up that said MEMORY FULL. She groaned, slumping forward.

"You okay?" Taylor asked, taking her by the arm.

She nodded. "Yeah. It just hurt a little."

"Wow. You filled the computer," Ostin said. "It has a terabyte of storage. You must have downloaded most of their mainframe." He looked at me. "We need a bigger computer."

"We got a lot of it, though, didn't we?" I asked.

Ostin nodded. "We got a boatload. Let's see if we can find your mom." He lifted his hands above the keyboard as if he were a pianist about to start a performance. He typed my mother's name into the computer's find function.

I held my breath. Taylor took my hand as we waited. A screen came up.

NO MATCHING FILES

My heart fell.

"I'll try 'prisoners,'" Ostin said.

NO MATCHING FILES

"Maybe they use a different word," I said. "Is there a GP file?"

“Let’s see.”

Ostin typed in “GP.” About two dozen folders came up. “This one has the most information, let’s see what’s inside.” He clicked on it. “Holy cow,” he said. “Look at that.”

There were thousands of records with names and mug-shot-type photographs.

“What are those numbers?” I asked, pointing to a series of numbers that appeared beneath each record.

Ostin glanced through the numbers looking for a pattern. “I’m guessing the first is the GP’s serial number, like they give convicts in prisons. The second, based on the recurring sequence, appears to be a date, probably when they were admitted. I know how to verify that.” He typed in a number. A picture of a terrified Wade appeared on the screen. “Yep. It’s the day admitted. The third . . .” He hesitated, slowly rubbing his hand over his forehead. “Hmm. The list is sorted by the serial numbers, but you’ll notice the last numbers seem to show up in clumped sequences. I’m betting it’s where they’re being held—they’re just using a number instead of a location.”

“That’s not going to help us,” Taylor said.

“On the contrary,” Ostin replied. “It will tell us how many Elgen facilities there are.”

“What’s that?” I said, pointing to a folder that read:

CONFIDENTIAL MEMOS: STARXOURCE PLANTS

“No idea,” Ostin said. He clicked on the folder.

MEMO

Mr. Chairman,

Please find requested report of Starxource development. Note: All countries with populations of fewer than 15,000 are deemed irrelevant unless there are recognizable political ties that may allow us future development in larger economies; i.e., Saint Barths—

France. (Grid Infrastructure development will be detailed in alternative report.)

Beta Control Countries

Anguilla (Starxource
Functioning 100%)

Christmas Island (Starxource
Functioning 100%)

Cook Islands (Starxource Aborted)

Falkland Islands (Starxource
Functioning 96%)

Saint Barths (Starxource
Functioning 96%)

**Operational Starxource Plants/Combined
Populations: 115,597,166**

Palau 21,000

British Virgin Islands 28,213

Gibraltar 29,441

Monaco 35,881

Saint Martin 36,824

Cayman Islands 54,878

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| <i>Greenland</i> | 56,890 |
| <i>Bermuda</i> | 64,237 |
| <i>Dominica</i> | 71,685 |
| <i>Jersey</i> | 97,857 |
| <i>Aruba</i> | 101,484 |
| <i>Tonga</i> | 103,036 |
| <i>Grenada</i> | 110,821 |
| <i>Samoa</i> | 184,032 |
| <i>Finland</i> | 5,405,590 |
| <i>Zimbabwe</i> | 12,754,000 |
| <i>Taiwan</i> | 23,200,000 |
| <i>Peru</i> | 29,797,694 |
| <i>Tanzania</i> | 43,443,603 |
| Plants Under Construction (PUC)/Combined Populations: | 32,623,410 |
| <i>Portugal</i> | 10,561,614 |
| <i>Greece</i> | 10,787,690 |
| <i>Chad</i> | 11,274,106 |

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| Under Negotiation/Combined Populations: | 1,010,135,758 |
| <i>Poland</i> | 38,092,000 |
| <i>Sudan</i> | 45,047,502 |
| <i>Spain</i> | 46,196,278 |
| <i>South Korea</i> | 48,750,000 |
| <i>Italy</i> | 60,600,000 |
| <i>France</i> | 65,073,482 |
| <i>Philippines*</i> | 94,000,000 |
| <i>Pakistan</i> | 187,000,000+ |
| <i>Brazil*</i> | 192,376,496 |
| <i>India*</i> | 233,000,000 |

***Top 10 Populous Countries**

Within 24 months we will be providing power to 19.89% of countries comprising 46% of the world's population. The current global economic stagnation provides an ideal political and socioeconomic environment to allow our entrance into these countries that might otherwise be wary of our global growth and Elgen control. It is our estimation that within 48 months we will control the energy and, subsequently, the economies of 78% of the world's population.

Dr. C. J. Hatch

“It’s from Hatch!” Ostin said.

“It sounds like he’s talking about global conquest,” Taylor said.

Ostin clicked on another folder. “Check this out.” He pulled up a video screen that showed a large logo.

“It’s a news story about the Elgen,” he said.

“Run the video,” I said.

ELGEN

Energy Solutions today for a brighter tomorrow

Ostin clicked the play button and an attractive, professionally dressed woman with a British accent began speaking:

REPORTER: *In global news, Elgen Inc., an international energy conglomerate, has announced a new source of cheap, renewable energy. Elgen’s Starsource power plants promise to “light up the globe” by delivering economical, renewable, and environmentally friendly power to the world.*

The video cut to a shot of Dr. Hatch.

“Die, you pig!” Ostin shouted.

“Quiet,” Taylor said.

REPORTER: *Dr. C. J. Hatch, CEO of Elgen Inc., told reporters that the Starsource project would revolutionize the world in more ways than just affordable power bills.*

The audio came up on Hatch.

HATCH: *Currently more than twenty-five percent of the world’s population lives without electrical power. It is Elgen Inc.’s goal to remedy this problem within our lifetime. The benefits of our Starsource plants are innumerable, as will be the relief of human suffering . . .*

“Human suffering,” Ostin said bitterly. “The man invented it.”

“Shh,” Taylor said.

HATCH: . . . *and other sociopolitical factors, such as freeing children in underdeveloped countries from gathering wood and fuel all day, so they can attend school.*

REPORTER: *The technology behind your Starxource plants is more confidential than the formula for Coca-Cola, but rumors are that you have created sustainable cold fusion.*

HATCH: *The process we’ve developed might best be compared to cold fusion; however, there is no environmental backlash. Starxource plants create no nuclear waste, and there is no danger of a nuclear core meltdown like that experienced in Chernobyl or during the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster.*

REPORTER: *When will the first Starxource plants begin operating?*

HATCH (smiling): *They already are. Elgen Inc. has been operating mini-power plants in developing countries for more than three years now, and the benefits to the local communities have far surpassed our greatest hopes. We are now preparing to operate in more populated countries.*

REPORTER: *Tesla, Edison, and now Dr. C. J. Hatch. Clean, cheap, and renewable energy from Elgen Inc. Finally, some good news for a change. I’m Devina Sawyers. Back to you, Mark and Carole.*

After the video ended we all sat quietly.

“Hatch said the Elgen were going to control the world,” I said. “If they control the world’s power, they control the world, don’t they?”

“But it doesn’t make sense,” Ostin said.

“What doesn’t?” Taylor asked.

“Cold fusion’s not their bag. The Elgen scientists are biologists, not physicists. It doesn’t make sense that they would invent or discover something outside their field of research. It would be like a pizza chain building cars.”

Taylor pointed to a folder next to the one Ostin had just opened: ER Protocol. "What's that?"

Ostin looked at it. "ER . . . Emergency room protocol?" Ostin clicked on the file.

MEMO

Dr. Hatch,

Due to your recent report of the likelihood of additional ER21 escapes, the board wants to know what protocol has been initiated in order to deal with a potential outbreak. There is concern that due to the organisms' short gestation periods, an epidemic of ER could quickly spread near one of our Starxource plants, jeopardizing our control. Do the ER20 and ER21 propagate outside the controlled environs, and if so, for how many generations? We have reviewed the press coverage you enclosed concerning the recent ER outbreak near our Puerto Maldonado plant. What is our status to date?

"What's an ER21?" Taylor asked.

"Never heard of it," Ostin said. "It sounds like a virus, which is something the Elgen would do. But what does that have to do with a power plant?" He turned to Grace. "Do you know?"

Grace shook her head. "I've never heard of it."

We continued reading the chain.

MEMO

Mr. Chairman,

The outbreaks of ER20 and, more specifically, ER21 in Puerto Maldonado have been contained. It was fortunate for us that this outbreak occurred during the rainy season, as the ER cannot withstand the direct application of water due to the specimen's biological mutations.

Dr. C. J. Hatch

MEMO

Dr. Hatch,

How can you be certain of the successful containment of the ER20/ER21?

MEMO

Mr. Chairman,

We have developed sophisticated el-readers for detecting ER20/ER21 over large areas. Also, the properties of the living ER20/ER21 make them highly visible in darkness.

Dr. C. J. Hatch

MEMO

Dr. Hatch,

Fortunate as it may be that the Puerto Maldonado situation has been contained, it is of concern to us that it was only by "fortune" that a near catastrophic situation was mitigated. Please respond to our initial inquiry. Do the ER20 and ER21 propagate outside the controlled environs, and if so, for how many generations?

MEMO

Mr. Chairman,

In regard to your inquiry about ER reproduction outside of captivity, the ER20/ER21 do, in fact, propagate the genetic mutation that is developmentally favorable for the rapid production and operation of

Starxource plants. However, scientists at our Kaohsiung, Taiwan, plant have developed an ingenious solution. We have genetically altered the next phase, ER22, with a 92% iodine deficiency, far less than is available in any natural environment. The ER will die within 72 hours without the supplements we provide. Our beta test of ER22 in the Aruba, Puerto Maldonado, and Taiwanese plants has proven successful, and we will be neutralizing all ER21 as soon as we can replace them with the ER22, as not to disrupt our current power production and potentially damage our grids in those regions.

MEMO

Dr. Hatch,

Due to the short gestation period of the specimen, is it possible that some ER could survive longer than 72 hours and reproduce?

MEMO

Mr. Chairman,

In response to your recent inquiry, the answer is no. It is not possible.

“Any idea what that’s all about?” I asked.

Ostin shrugged. “I need to do a little detective work. The memo said this ER escape made the news. We’ve got a date here and a general location.” He looked at me. “This might take a little while.”

“Then I’m going to take a nap,” I said. “Wake me if you find something.”

“Will do,” Ostin said.

I walked out of the front room to find a bedroom.

Taylor followed me out. “Michael. Can we talk?”

“Sure. Let’s go in here.”

We walked into a bedroom. I sat at the foot of the bed and Taylor sat cross-legged on the floor.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She looked down at her hands. “How long are we going to stay here?”

“I don’t know. The man didn’t say.”

“Can you call him?”

“I don’t know.” I lifted the phone from my pocket, and it immediately lit up. For the first time I noticed that it didn’t even have a keypad. “It’s not designed to dial out—only to receive.” I looked over at her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“No,” she said. She lowered her head into her hands, her coffee-brown hair falling in front of her like a veil. “All of this is my fault. And now Ostin’s parents are gone, and Jack’s house is burned down. If I hadn’t looked for the Elgen online . . .”

I sat down next to her on the floor. “Taylor, you can’t keep doing this to yourself. You’ve seen how high-tech the Elgen are. It was just a matter of time before they found us.”

“What if they take my family?”

“Then we’ll rescue them,” I said. “Just like we’re going to rescue my mother.”

She looked at me, forcing a smile. “Thank you. I’m glad . . .”

I waited for her to finish but she didn’t. “You’re glad . . . what?”

“Can’t you read my mind?” she asked sadly. “You could before.”

“There’s got to be a lot of electricity between us,” I said.

She looked into my eyes. “And there’s not?”

I smiled, restraining my impulse to tic. “That’s a different kind.”

She put her arms around my neck and laid her head on my shoulder. “What I was going to say was, I’m glad I have you for my boyfriend.”

“Me too,” I said. “Sometimes I have to pinch myself.”

She pinched my arm and smiled. “You’re so cute.”

We sat there for several minutes, and my thoughts drifted to something I’d been hiding since my first meeting with Hatch. I forgot Taylor could read my mind.

She jerked back, her eyes wide. “Why are you thinking that?”

“Thinking what?”

“You know *what*. About dying.”

“It’s nothing,” I said.

“Dying isn’t *nothing*. It’s a very big *something*.”

“Why were you listening to my thoughts?”

“It just happens. Sometimes I don’t even know I’m doing it.” She squeezed my hand. “Why were you thinking that?”

“It’s just something Hatch said. I don’t know if it’s even true. . . .”

“What did he tell you?”

“He said four of the other kids have already died from cancer caused by our electricity, and I have more electricity than they did.” I looked into her eyes. “He said I might be dying.”

Taylor looked as if she didn’t know how to respond. “Was he lying?”

“I don’t know. You know him better than I do.”

Her eyes started to well up with tears. “You can’t die, Michael.”

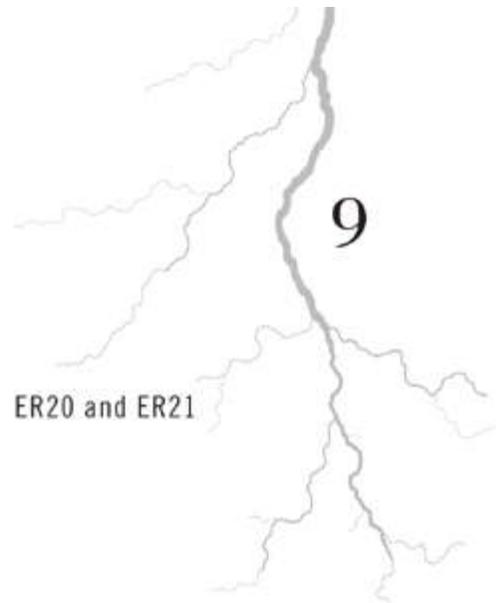
“Believe me, it’s not something I’m trying to do,” I said.

She put her head back on my shoulder, and I held her for several minutes until Ostin barged into the room. “Hey, guys. You’ll never guess what I just discovered.” He stopped and looked at us. “What’s going on?”

Taylor sat up, pulling her hair back from her face. “Nothing,” she said, her eyes still red.

“What did you discover?” I asked.

He looked back and forth between us, then said, “I figured out what the ER20 and ER21 are. Dudes, you’re never going to believe it.”



Taylor held my hand as we followed Ostin back into the front room. Everyone was gathered around the computer.

Wade was sitting in a beanbag chair, still looking angry that Jack had left him. “C’mon, already,” he said. “What’s the big announcement? What’s an ER?”

One thing I know about Ostin is that it’s impossible for him to just tell you the solution to a problem—he has to tell you *how* he solved the problem. It’s annoying sometimes—actually, it’s annoying all the time—but I’m pretty sure he can’t help it.

Ostin’s face was pink with excitement. “So I started searching for ER, ER20, ER21, ER22, but it just led to that old TV series and other stuff. Then I searched the location mentioned in the memo: Puerto Maldonado.

“Puerto Maldonado is a Peruvian city in the Amazon jungle near Cuzco. The memo said that the outbreak occurred during the rainy season, which is between November and March, so I started to scan through their local newspaper for anything unusual. Look what I found.” He clicked a link and an article appeared on the screen. The headline read:

Las Ratas Abrasadoras Destruyen El Pueblo

“Isn’t that crazy!” Ostin said.

I looked at him blankly. “What language is that, Spanish?”

“Yeah, unbelievable, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know; I don’t speak Spanish.”

“Oh, sorry,” Ostin said. “I forgot.”

Ostin was born in Austin, Texas (hence his name), where he had a Mexican nanny. Average human babies pick up second languages remarkably fast, but with Ostin’s IQ, I’m sure he was reciting Shakespeare in Spanish by the time he was five.

“*Las ratas abrasadoras* is Spanish for ‘fiery rats.’”

“What’s a fiery rat?” Taylor asked.

“Exactly,” Ostin said. “There’s no such thing.” His voice lowered. “Or is there?” He sounded ridiculously dramatic, like the host of some UFO show on the Discovery Channel. “Check this out,” he said, scrolling down the screen. “According to this article, there was a plague of rats in Peru that nearly wiped out a small village. The town’s mayor said that the rats started fires everywhere they went.”

“What were they doing?” McKenna asked. “Smoking?”

Ostin didn’t catch that she was joking. “No, I think they do it the same way you do. Or, at least, Michael and Zeus.”

“They’re electric?” I asked.

Ostin touched his finger to his nose. “Bingo. One eyewitness said that these rats glowed at night, like they were on fire. And when he tried to kill one with a crowbar, he said ‘*me dio una descarga como anguila eléctrica.*’”

“Translate,” I said.

“It shocked him like an electric eel.”

“Like an electric eel?” Ian repeated. “They’ve discovered a new breed of rat?”

“No,” I said. “The Elgen have *made* a new breed of rat. They’ve electrified rats.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Ostin said. “They’re having trouble creating more electric kids, but they’ve learned how to make electric rodents.”

“Why would they do that?” Taylor asked.

“It was probably just an accident at first,” Ostin replied. “I mean, we test everything on rats, right? Drugs, cosmetics, shampoo. Makes sense they were testing rats in the MEI. Voila, electric rats.”

“Whoa,” I said.

“Yeah, but what are they good for?” Taylor asked.

“That was my next question,” Ostin said. “So I scanned the Internet for any other stories about fiery or electric rats. I came up with mentions in Saint Barths, the Cook Islands, and Anguilla.” He looked at me, grinning. “Sound familiar?”

“No,” I said.

“Remember what we read earlier? That’s where the Elgen have built their Starxource plants.”

It took me a moment to make the connection. “You mean their power plants are rat powered?”

Ostin was so excited he almost jumped up from his chair. “Exactly!”

“Why rats?” Taylor asked.

“Why not!” Ostin exclaimed. “They’re perfect! The problem with most of our current energy sources is what?”

“They’re expensive,” Taylor said, turning to me. “My dad’s always complaining about how much it costs when I leave lights on.”

“Yes, but more importantly, they’re exhaustible. They’re limited. You can’t make more oil, unless you can wait around a few hundred million years. Once it’s gone, it’s gone. The big search is for renewable energy, and the Elgen found it. Actually, they made it. Rats are super-renewable. They’re practically breeding machines! Think about it. Rats are mature at five weeks, their gestation period is just three weeks, and the average litter is eight to ten babies. If you started with just two rats and they had an average of ten offspring every three weeks, then they had babies, and so on, in one year you could have . . .” He did the math in his head. “Holy rodent. Under ideal circumstances and lacking natural predators, like in a laboratory, you could breed *billions* of rats in one year.”

“That’s crazy,” McKenna said.

“And if each one of those rats could generate even a tenth the electricity that one of us does . . . ,” I said.

“You could power entire cities,” Ostin said. “Enough rats, you could power the entire world.”

I shook my head. “They’re making rat power. The Elgen are making *rat* power. That’s why they’re afraid of them escaping. If they breed, anyone could use them.”

“They could also be like those killer bees that escaped from South America,” McKenna said.

“You mean the band?” Wade asked.

“What band?” McKenna said.

“The Killer Bees.”

McKenna shook her head. “I’m not talking about some stupid band.”

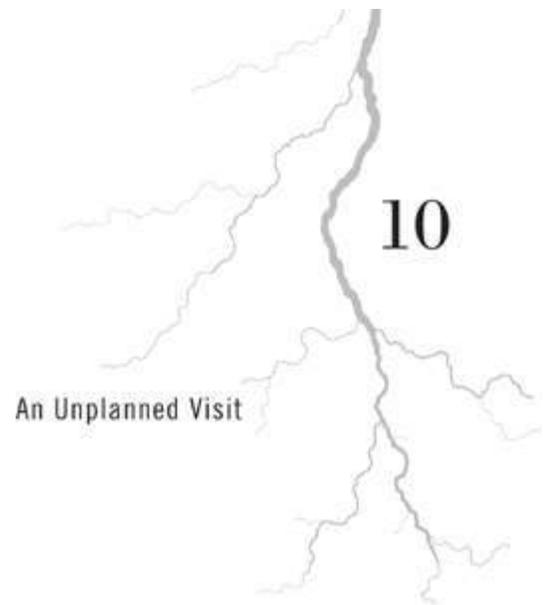
“She means Africanized bees,” Ostin said. “In the fifties some scientists took African bees to Brazil to create a better honeybee, but the African bees escaped and starting breeding with local—”

“Good job, Ostin,” I said, cutting him off. “You did it.”

“Thanks,” he said proudly. “It’s amazing, they’re creating these power plants and no one knows how they’re doing it, but the answer is right in front of them. Apparently the Elgen have a sense of humor after all.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The name of their plants . . . Starxource. It makes their power plants sound like they run off thermonuclear fusion, since that’s where stars get their energy from.” He turned around and looked at me. “But ‘star’ is just ‘rats’ spelled backward.”



Rat power. In a bizarre way it made sense. Like my mother was fond of saying, “whatever works.” The ramifications of this discovery made sense as well. If the world became dependent on Elgen energy, the Elgen would control the world.

“Man, all this thinking has made me hungry,” Ostin said. “Where’s the pizza?” I was glad to see he had his appetite back. He looked at the clock on the wall. “What’s taking them so long?”

“They’re probably kissing,” Wade said, still bitter about being left behind.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Ian said. “Both Hummers are in the driveway. But they’re not in them.” His expression fell. “Oh no.”

Just then something crashed through the home’s front window. Before we could see what it was, there were two loud explosions, and the room was filled with an overpowering stench. My eyes watered and I covered my nose and mouth with my hand and yelled for everyone to run.

Suddenly the door burst open, and a man shouted, “Everyone on the ground. Put your hands in front of you. Do it! Do it now!” He ran inside the front room, flanked by two other guards.

Zeus was the first to react. He extended his hands and blasted the man standing in the doorway, knocking him back against the wall. But before Zeus could hit anyone else, two darts struck him in the side. Zeus cried out and fell to the ground, screaming and writhing in pain. The darts were peculiar looking, fat like a cigar, tapered at one end, and yellow with red stripes.

Elgen guards poured into the room through the front and back doors, shouting as they entered. They were wearing black rubberized jumpsuits with helmets, masks, and gloves, which made them look more like machines than humans. Each of them carried a chrome weapon I'd never seen before. It looked like a handgun, only broader and without the barrel.

I pulsed while Taylor was trying to reboot the guards, but neither of us seemed to have any effect on them. Darts hit us almost simultaneously, one in her chest and one in her knee, and three on me, two hitting me in the side, the third just below my collarbone. We both collapsed, as if our bones had suddenly turned to rubber. The experience was similar to what we felt when Nichelle, one of Hatch's electric kids, would use her powers to drain the electricity out of us. Except this new machine was even worse.

I began to shake uncontrollably, and I wondered if I was having a heart attack. A moment later a man wearing a purple uniform walked in through the front door. He was followed by a guard nearly six inches taller than him. The guard in purple held an electronic tablet, which he studied as he approached Zeus.

"Frank," he said to Zeus.

"I'm Zeus," Zeus said.

"Yes," the man said. "Dr. Hatch said you suffered from delusions of grandeur. You know he's looking forward to your reunion. He has something very special in mind for you. He said a pool party was in order."

Zeus turned pale.

I looked over to see Ostin on the ground with one of the guards standing above him. The guard's boot was on Ostin's neck, pushing his face into the carpet. There were four darts in Ostin's back. "Captain, the darts don't work on him," the guard shouted.

“Idiot, he’s not electric,” the captain replied.

“What do I do with them?”

“Same as the ugly kid over there,” he said, pointing at Wade. “Take them to the van.”

The captain walked over to Ian, who had three darts in him. He was on his knees and holding his side. “So you’re Ian,” the captain said. “How’s the vision?”

“Perfect,” Ian said defiantly, turning toward the man’s voice.

“Really? Perfect?”

“Yeah, I can’t see your ugly face.”

He kicked Ian in the stomach. Ian fell to his side, gasping.

“Too bad you didn’t see that coming.” He shouted to the guards, “Get them all into the van. Move it!”

At least Jack and Abi got away, I thought.

The captain looked over at Taylor and me, then walked up to Taylor, his stooge following closely behind him. “You must be Taylor,” he said, looking her in the eyes. “The reason we wear these uncomfortable helmets. Let’s remedy that.” He turned to his guard. “Belt.”

“Here, sir,” he said, handing the captain a long strap with blinking green LEDs.

He cinched the belt over Taylor’s head and chin. It looked like some kind of orthodontic headgear except with a lot of wires and lights. Taylor gasped. “It hurts.”

“Does it?” he asked. He shouted to the guards who were still in the room, “You can take your helmets off now.” Then he grabbed Taylor by the chin and forced her to look at him. “I heard Tara had a carbon copy.”

“I’m nothing like her,” Taylor said, wincing in pain.

“You’re just as beautiful as she is.” He ran his finger across her face.

“Don’t touch her, you creep,” I said.

The man turned to me, his eyes narrowing with contempt. “And you must be the famous Mr. Vey. Dr. Hatch was very specific about you.” He touched something on the tablet he was carrying, and the pain in my body increased. I screamed out, gasping for air. If you have

dental fillings and have chewed aluminum foil, you have an idea what it felt like—except spread throughout my whole body.

“Stop it!” Taylor shouted. “Please.”

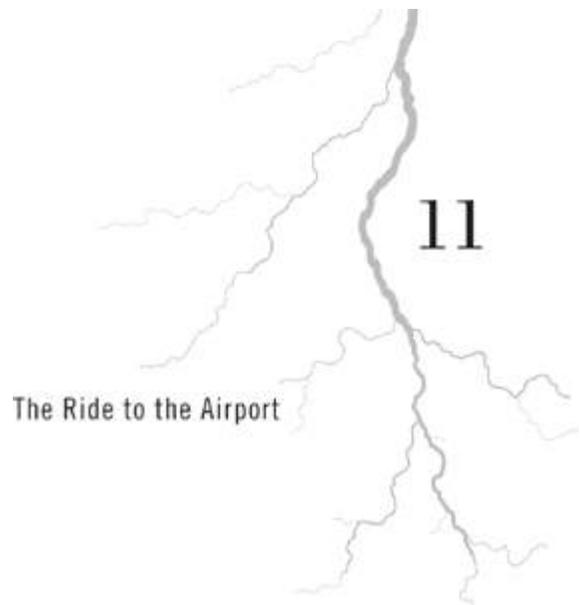
I rolled over onto my back, struggling for breath. The pain continued to pulse through my body—a wild, agonizing throb followed by a sharp, crisp sting. “Stop it!” I shouted.

“I don’t take orders from little boys.”

After another thirty seconds Taylor screamed, “Please stop it! Please. You’re killing him. I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Don’t be dramatic, sweetie. I’m not killing him. I’m just making him wish he were dead. Dr. Hatch gave us instructions to bring him back alive—like an animal to be put in a zoo. And yes, Miss Ridley, you *will* do whatever I want.”

He pushed something on the tablet and the pain eased. “There’s an app for everything these days, isn’t there?” He looked at me. “We underestimated you, Mr. Vey. But it won’t happen again. Trust me, there are worse things in this world than Cell 25.”



I was carried by a guard out to the backyard, where the guards had parked their truck—a large van emblazoned with the name of a moving company. The darts were still in me, and the guards had special hooks with which they secured them. I don't know what the darts were, but they seemed to suck the life out of me, twisting my thoughts with pain.

Everything seemed to be happening around me in quick, staccato flashes, like I was surfing TV channels with a remote.

I saw Ian being dragged off by three men. McKenna was crying. Ostin had a bloody nose and was calling a guard a dumb gorilla. Two guards were standing near the garage taking pictures of the Hummers. I heard their conversation, or at least some of it—one guard was asking the other where we'd gotten the cars.

My mind flashed, and I remembered that Ian had said both Hummers were in the garage—where were Jack and Abigail? Then I noticed three pizza boxes on the ground.

Connected to the back of the truck was a motorized platform that the guards used to lift us into the cargo bay. The inside of the truck looked like a laboratory and was filled with long rows of blinking diodes and pale green monitors. On one side of the truck were

horizontal cots, stacked above one another like shelves. Zeus and Ian were already strapped down on the bottom two cots.

On the opposite side of the truck was a white, rubber-coated bench with rubber shackles every three or four feet.

Jack and Abigail were both strapped to the bench, their arms fastened above their heads, with belts across their waists, thighs, and calves. Abigail was crying, and I could see that Jack was bleeding from his nose and forehead. He hadn't gone without a fight.

On both sides, near the center of the truck, were narrow, lockerlike cabinets. Behind those was a console with digital readouts and rows of switches and more flashing lights. A guard was seated at the console, watching as we were brought in. Waiting for us.

One of the guards pulled a cot out like a drawer, and I was laid on it, then strapped down at my ankles, waist, chest, and arms. Last, a wire was fastened around my neck, holding me fast and making it difficult to breathe.

"C is connected," a guard shouted to the man near the console.

Through my peripheral vision I saw the man push a lever and I immediately felt a tingling in my neck followed by stinging pain throughout my body. I felt nauseous, as if I might throw up, but fought the urge.

"C is active," the man in back said. The guard pushed my cot toward the wall, into its slot. The empty cot above me was only six inches from my nose.

"What's this?" a guard said, holding up my cell phone.

"I got it off him," the other said. "It's dead. Take it back to the lab."

They stowed the phone in one of the cabinets. My mind was still racing, trying to figure everything out. Breathing was a challenge. Escape was impossible. Almost everything in the back of the truck was coated in plastic or rubber, which I figured was so we couldn't short things out.

Wade and Ostin were secured next to Abigail and Jack on the long bench across from me, their hands strapped over their heads. Taylor was brought in next and bound to the cot above me. I could hear her crying as they tied her down. The sound of her in pain hurt as much as the machine I was connected to.

“B is connected,” the guard said.

Taylor moaned.

“B is active,” the man in back said.

“What about them?” one of the guards said, walking up with McKenna and Grace. “They’re electric.”

“They’re harmless,” the voice said. “Put them on the bench.”

McKenna and Grace were strapped to the bench, their arms lifted above their heads like the others’.

When we were all secured, the overhead door was brought down, leaving the truck illuminated in an eerie, greenish glow. Two guards were still with us, one sitting on a short bench across from Ostin while the other walked to the front of the cargo hold and disappeared through a door to the cab. The engine started up and the truck shook, then lurched forward, swinging everyone on the bench to one side.

I felt drugged. It took effort to maintain consciousness.

“Taylor,” I groaned, the effort taking almost everything I had.

“Shut up!” the guard shouted, which, in my state, seemed to echo a dozen times between my ears.

Taylor never answered. I could hear Zeus breathing heavily below me. No one spoke. I felt like we were being driven to an execution, which was possible.

After a few minutes of silence, the guard stood up from his bench and walked over to the cots, squatting down next to Zeus.

“Hey, stinky. Remember me? It’s your buddy Wes? I used to be on the electric children detail. I bet you’re glad to see me again.”

Zeus said nothing.

“Well, I’m excited to see you. I’ve waited a long, long time for our reunion—to catch up on old times. Maybe you remember when you and Bryan thought it would be really funny to shock me when I was in the shower?”

Zeus still didn’t speak.

“Yeah, I’m sure you remember. How could you forget something that hilarious? Unfortunately, *I* almost forgot about it because of the concussion I got from hitting my head on the tile. And then I got distracted by the surgery it took to fix the slipped disk in my back. Not that they really fixed it, I still have chronic back pain. But no big

deal, right? Everyone had a good laugh.” His voice dripped with venom. “I guess we just don’t go well together, stinky. That happens, you know? Some things don’t go well together. Like, say, oil and water. They just don’t mix.” He turned around to the cabinets and brought something out. “Or should I say Zeus and water.”

I caught a glimpse of what he’d taken from the cabinet. It was a child’s plastic squirt gun.

“I brought this especially for our time together. Our special reunion. Oh, look at you. You look scared. What are you, a baby? It’s just a tiny, little squirt gun. What harm could that do?”

He pulled the trigger and a stream of water showered on Zeus. I heard the crisp sparking of electricity. “Aaaagh,” Zeus groaned.

“Oh, come on. It’s just water, stinky. It’s about time you bathed. You smell like an outhouse.” He sprayed again. There was a louder snap, and Zeus cried out this time. He was panting heavily and moaning in pain.

“Ah, the stench. How do you live with yourself? Or don’t pigs smell themselves. Maybe you like your own stink.”

He sprayed again. Zeus sobbed. “Please . . .”

“Please? You want more?”

“Hey, be cool,” Ian said.

“Shut your mouth, mole boy, or I’ll turn up your RESAT.” He leaned in toward Zeus. “Do you remember what you said to me after I got out of the hospital? You said, ‘C’mon, Wes, where’s your sense of humor?’” He began pulling the trigger over and over.

Zeus let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“C’mon, Zeus, where’s your sense of humor?”

Zeus’s screams rose higher still.

“Not so funny now, is it?” he shouted over Zeus’s screams.

“Stop it!” Abigail yelled.

The man looked back at her. “Stay out of this, sweet cheeks.”

“Please,” she said. “Please. I’ll take away your pain.”

“What?”

“I’ll take away your pain, if you’ll leave him alone.”

Wes stared at her, wondering if she was telling him the truth. “If this is a joke . . .”

“It’s what she does,” Ostin said. “She stimulates nerve endings. She can take away pain.”

“I’ll help you,” she said. “Please stop hurting him.”

Wes turned back to Zeus, then spit on him, which also elicited a sizzling spark. Then he walked back to the bench where Abigail was sitting.

“If this is a trick, I guarantee you’ll wish you were never born.”

“I can’t hurt you,” Abigail said. “I wouldn’t if I could.”

He studied her expression, then sat down next to her. “What do I do?”

“I need to touch you. If you unlock my hands . . .”

“That ain’t gonna happen, baby face.”

“Then put where it hurts next to me. Anywhere.”

“Your knee?”

She nodded.

He crouched on the floor next to her, his back pressed up against her. After a moment he sighed. “Wow. I’m going to have a talk with Hatch about keeping you around.”

Zeus was still whimpering below me, but Abigail had probably saved his life.

The truck continued on, but with few stops, which made me believe we were on the freeway. I turned my head as far as I could to look at the others. McKenna and Jack were shackled directly across from me. What was this thing I’d been hooked to? My body and my mind ached. My heart ached too, but that was my own doing. *What did I get my friends into? How could I have been so stupid to believe some stranger on a cell phone?*

Suddenly McKenna seemed to blur. It may have been sweat running down my forehead into my eyes, but something about her was different. Her skin color was changing. Was I hallucinating? Ostin looked at me, then he glanced over at McKenna. He got a strange expression on his face, and I wondered if he saw it too.

Ostin looked over at the guard, then suddenly began singing. “Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall. Ninety-nine bottles of beer. Take one down. Pass it around. Ninety-eight—”

“Shut up,” the guard said.

Ostin swallowed. “Just thought . . .”

“Shut up.”

Ostin clenched his jaw. He looked down for a moment as if thinking, then he said to the guard, “Those new gizmos you have rock. What do you call them?”

The guard didn’t answer. But he didn’t tell him to shut up either.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize they don’t tell you these things. Probably top secret. For the important guys . . .”

“It’s a RESAT,” the guard said.

Ostin nodded. “RESAT. Cool.”

I looked back over at McKenna. I wasn’t seeing things—her skin color really *was* changing. She was now almost glowing red. Ostin must have seen what she was doing and was trying to keep the guard distracted. I looked back at Ostin, who was nodding, carefully manipulating the guard.

“Clever. Clever indeed. RESAT is ‘Taser’ spelled backward.”

The man suddenly scratched his chin. “I never thought of that.”

“I’m sure you would have,” Ostin said. “If they didn’t work you so hard. I bet they work you like a rented mule.”

“You got that right, cheeseball.”

At that moment McKenna’s arms melted through the bands. She was free.

“But I bet you get great health benefits with all those Elgen doctors around.”

“You kiddin’ me?” the guard said. “The dental plan has a five-hundred-dollar deductible.”

“You’re pulling my leg,” Ostin said loudly. “Why even have it? That’s a whole head of cavities.”

“It’s a joke,” the man said.

McKenna slowly reached over and grabbed Jack’s bands, immediately melting through them. Jack slowly lowered his arms, rubbing his wrists. Suddenly the guard started to look back. Jack put his hands up again.

“Hey!” Ostin shouted.

The guard stopped.

“Do you have kids?”

“What?”

“Kids. Rug rats, spawn, you got them?”

“No.”

“Sorry, of course not. I’m sure you’re married to your job. If you had kids, the dental thing might still be worth it.”

“Family isn’t allowed,” the guard said. “It’s a regulation.”

“They regulate that, huh?” Ostin said. “You know, there’s something I can’t figure out.”

Jack reached down and unclasped his legs, then slowly inched down the bench toward the weapons cabinet.

“What?” the man asked.

“I can’t figure out how you’d go about getting hired for a job like yours. It’s not like you could post it in the Help Wanted section.”

“I can’t talk about that,” he said.

“I mean, what kind of ad would that be? Wanted: ugly, mean, smelly dudes with below-average IQs to kidnap and abuse teenagers.”

The guy’s mouth fell.

“What section would that be under anyway? Creepy Dudes?”

The man scowled. “You watch it, you smart-mouthed little—”

“Actually,” Ostin said, “you should watch it.”

“What the—”

Jack cracked the guard over the head with a truncheon, knocking him out with one blow. The guard slumped to the van’s floor.

“Man, that felt good,” Jack said, stretching out his arms like a baseball player at bat.

“Not to him,” Ostin said.

McKenna walked over to Ostin, who looked at her with admiration. “That was cool,” he said.

“Careful, don’t touch me,” she said, kneeling on the bench next to him. “I’m still pretty hot.”

“Yeah, you are *hot*,” Ostin said, sounding smitten.

McKenna grinned a little as she grabbed Ostin’s armbands and melted through them. “There you go.”

“Like buttah . . .,” Ostin said, stretching his arm. He bent over and unclasped his stomach and leg belts. “Let’s free Michael.”

“We’ve got to take care of this guy,” Jack said, standing above the guard, with the club.

“Let me loose,” Wade said. “I’ll help you.”

Jack unloosed his bands, and they lifted the guard up and strapped him to the wall while McKenna and Ostin unfastened my collar. The intense pain immediately stopped, and I groaned with relief, though I still felt as dizzy as if I’d just ridden the teacups ride at Disneyland for an hour.

“Well done, McKenna,” I said.

“Thanks.”

As I climbed out of the cot, Ostin and McKenna unstrapped Taylor, then Ian and Zeus. I helped Taylor climb out, then Ian. Zeus hadn’t moved. He was still in a lot of pain from the guard’s torture. “Can I help you?” I asked.

“Just give me a minute,” he said, rolling over in the cot.

“You okay, buddy?” I asked.

“Been better,” he said. His skin was blistered where the guard had sprayed water on him. “I don’t know what that new dart thing is,” he said. “But it’s like Nichelle in a can.”

“That’s exactly what it is,” Ostin said. “The Elgen must have found a way to replicate her powers without her weakness.”

“How’s your vision?” I asked Ian.

“It’s back,” he said.

Across the aisle Jack unloosed Abigail. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“You’re going to be okay,” he said. “I’ll get you out of here. I promise.”

As Jack freed Grace, Abigail knelt at Zeus’s side. She put her hand on him and closed her eyes. After a moment he relaxed and stilled. “Thank you for stopping him,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” she said.

I was leaning against the opposite wall, holding my head and trying not to throw up.

Taylor laid her hand on my back. “You okay?”

“Alive. How about you?”

“Me too,” she said hoarsely. “I wonder where they’re taking us.”

“We just passed a sign for the airport,” Ian said.

“What’s our situation with guards?” I asked.

“There are two guards driving this truck, one Escalade in front, two behind us.”

“How many guards in the Escalades?”

“Four in front, five and four in back.”

“We need to take charge of the van,” I said.

“Then what?” Ian said. “We can’t outrun the Escalades. Not in this whale.”

“We don’t need to,” Jack said. “We’ll crush them. I saw this in a movie once. But first we need to commandeer this bad boy.”

“That’s a good word,” Ostin said. “Commandeer.”

Jack looked at him. “What? You don’t think I know any big words?”

Ostin withered. “Sorry.”

“Anyone got a plan?” I asked.

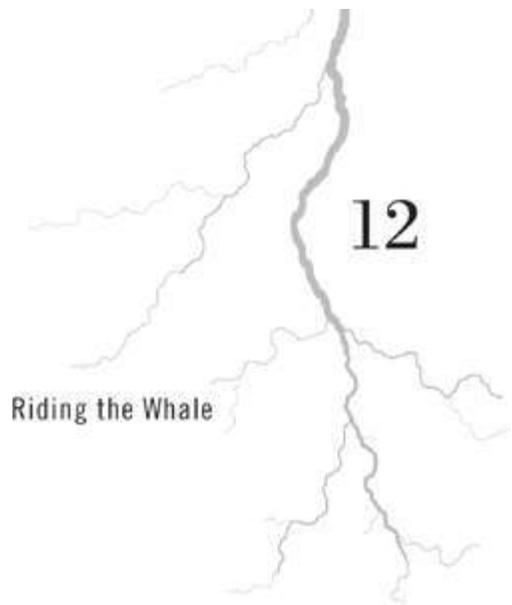
“I say we just storm the cab,” Jack said. “Commando-style.”

“Too risky,” I said. “They’ll crash.”

Ostin’s face lit up. “I have an idea,” he said. “A good one, with three parts.”

“Three parts?” I said. “That was fast.”

“Yes. This is going to be epic,” he said.



A couple of minutes later McKenna casually opened the door to the truck's dark cab. "Excuse me, guys. Can we stop to use the bathroom?"

Both men glanced back, their eyes wide with surprise.

"What are you—"

McKenna shouted, "Now!" All of us covered our eyes as she flashed to her full extent. A brilliant light filled the entire truck. Both men shouted and put their hands over their eyes. Jack and Wade rushed the cab, bringing clubs down over the guards' heads.

Jack knocked the driver out, but Wade only succeeded in dazing the other, so I put my hand on the guard's neck and pulsed, which took care of him. Wade and I climbed over the seat, and I held the wheel while Jack pulled the unconscious guard out of the way, then climbed behind the wheel.

"That was easy," Jack said, pressing down on the accelerator.

Zeus, Taylor, Ian, and McKenna dragged the men to the back of the truck and I used the van's passenger-side mirror to watch the two cars behind us. I hoped the other guards hadn't noticed the flash, but I was certain they had to have noticed our change in speed. This was confirmed ten seconds later when a voice came over the van's radio.

“Elgen Two, this is Elgen One. Are you having mechanical problems? Over.”

I looked at Jack. “Don’t answer.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” he said. “Time for phase two. We’ve got an exit a mile ahead of us, I’m going for it.” He hit the gas, moving up quickly on the Escalade in front of us. I climbed back over the seat to see what was going on in the rear.

The two guards had been strapped to the wall, next to the guard Wes, who was now awake. “You’re gonna pay for this!” he shouted angrily.

“Shut up, Wes,” Zeus said fiercely. Then he blasted him. The guard’s head jerked back so hard against the wall he knocked himself out again.

“Everyone, buckle up!” I shouted. “We’re going for phase two!”

“Phase two!” Ostin shouted. “Everyone in place!”

Everyone sat down, strapping the waist belts around themselves. I went back up front and buckled myself into the passenger seat. “Ready,” I said.

“Half mile,” Jack said. “If this doesn’t work, prepare for some crazy driving.”

“Better work,” I said. “We’ve only got a few seconds to hit phase three, so be ready. Everyone’s strapped in.”

“There’s our exit,” Jack said. “Hold on tight.” He hit the gas. In spite of the van’s size, it lurched forward, and Jack swerved into the lane left of the lead Escalade. We pulled up to the car’s side, and I could see the guards looking at us with surprise.

“Here goes,” Jack said. He spun the wheel to the right, forcing the moving van into the side of the Escalade. His timing was perfect as he pushed the car directly into the barrier between the exit and the freeway. The car smashed into the railing at nearly seventy-five miles per hour, flipping the car end over end.

Jack was grinning. “Just like Grand Theft Auto. Only better.”

I unbuckled and climbed to the back. “Ian!” I shouted. “Are we good?”

“They’re thirty feet behind us!” he shouted.

“Now, Taylor.”

Taylor put her head down and concentrated on rebooting the driver of the car behind us.

“You got him,” Ian said.

I braced myself against the wall. “Jack, now!”

Jack slammed on the brakes as hard as he could. There was a big jolt as the Escalade plowed into the van, followed by a second hit, when the rear Escalade plowed into the first. The force of the wreck jarred us, pushing our van partially sideways. All the lights in the back went out. Jack hit the gas again, pulling ahead of the collision.

“The first car is toast!” Ian shouted. “It’s crumpled!”

“How bad are we?” Jack shouted over his shoulder.

“Not sure,” Ian said, looking down. “But I see sparks.” The truck was vibrating and there was a sound of something scraping. “Something’s dragging. I think it’s the lift.”

“What about the second car?” I asked Ian.

“We’re good . . . wait.” His expression changed. “No way.”

“What?” I asked.

“It’s still running. They’re coming after us.”

“Jack, the second car survived the crash!” I shouted.

“I can see him in my mirror!” Jack shouted. He sounded worried.

“He’s got a big gun,” Ian said. “He’s aiming it at us.” He looked around. “Everyone on the ground. Now!”

Everyone unbuckled and dropped to the floor.

Jack shouted, “We can’t outrun him. Are there any guns back there?”

“McKenna, we need light,” I said.

She lit up the back of the van.

Taylor and I crawled to the cabinets and looked through them. “Nothing. Just those RESAT things.”

“This just keeps getting better!” Jack shouted. “Hold on, kids!” He swerved to the right, and we all tumbled to the other side of the van. Bullets began ripping through the van.

“Ian, what’s going on out there?”

“Nothing good. They’ve got a cannon-looking thing.”

“A what?”

Suddenly we heard the gun again, though nothing came through the walls this time. The truck dropped and began veering.

“They shot out our tires!” Jack shouted. “Someone think of something.”

“Taylor!” I shouted. “Can you reboot them?”

“It won’t work,” Ian said. “They’ve put their helmets back on.” His brow furrowed. “What kind of gun is that?”

Ostin crawled to the back and looked out through a bullet hole in the back door. “It’s an antitank gun,” he said. “They’ll blow us sky-high.”

The truck dropped again as we lost another tire, and Jack swerved wildly trying to keep the vehicle under control. “Someone better think of something fast!” Jack shouted.

A voice came over the radio. “You’ve got ten seconds to pull the van over, or we will blow you up. Do you understand?”

“Don’t say anything,” Wade said. “They won’t shoot us.”

The voice returned. “Ten, nine, eight, seven . . .”

I looked over at Taylor, then took her hand.

Jack shouted back, “What do I do?”

“Four, three, two . . .”

“Pull over—” I started to yell, but before I could finish there was a loud explosion.

“Holy cow!” Ian yelled.

I looked around. We were all there. The walls were still there. The van was still there. “What was that?”

Ian was just staring at the back door in awe, shaking his head. “The Escalade . . .” He stopped in midsentence.

“Did you guys see that?” Jack shouted from the front. “That thing blew up like a bomb!”

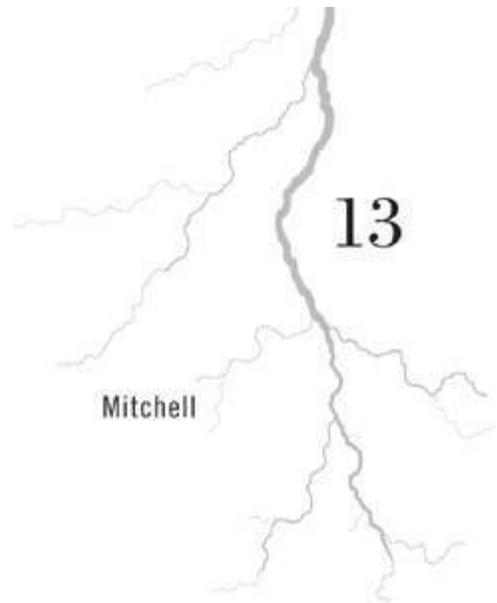
“What blew up?” I asked.

“The Escalade. It, like, disintegrated. It’s just a big ball of fire.”

“What caused that?”

“I have no idea,” Jack replied. “But I am *not* complaining.”

“Good driving, man,” I said. “Now get us off the freeway. Let’s get out of this beast.”



Jack pulled off at the next exit and drove to the far side of a Flying J truck stop. A long row of trucks was parked next to the mini-mart, and Jack parked the crippled van between two long semis and shut off the engine.

Jack smiled at me as I walked up to the front. “Just another day in the life of a superhero,” he said.

I grinned. “You’re having fun, aren’t you?”

“As long as we’re winning, bro,” Jack said. “As long as we’re winning.”

“We’ve got to find somewhere safe to finish uploading Grace’s info,” I said. “Any ideas?”

Jack thought for a moment, then said, “I know where we can go. Do you still have that phone?”

“It doesn’t dial out,” I said. “Besides, I’m sure the Elgen would be listening in on it if it did.”

“There’s probably a pay phone at the mini-mart,” Ostin said, walking up to us.

“Come on,” Jack said, climbing out of the van.

I turned to Taylor, who had just walked up to the front. “Keep everyone inside until we get back.”

“Where are you going?”

“Jack’s calling someone to pick us up. We’ll be right back.”

“Hey, Michael!” McKenna shouted. “Would you get me something to drink—like water or Gatorade? I’m really thirsty.”

“Got it,” I said.

“I need a lot. Like a gallon.”

“A gallon?”

“I’m really thirsty.”

By the time I got out of the truck, Jack and Wade were already standing next to a pay phone outside of the truck stop. As I approached I heard Jack say, “I don’t have time to tell you right now. Just shut up and listen. . . . I’ll tell you when you get here. Get your mom’s Suburban and come to the Flying J truck stop off I-Eighty-Four West. It’s just south of Meridian. You can’t miss it. . . . Hurry. Yes, I know it’s late. Yes, Wade is with me. . . . Because you weren’t invited, that’s why. Consider yourself lucky. Now hurry. . . . No, I told you, bring the Suburban. . . . There’s a bunch of us. I said I’ll tell you when you get here.” Jack hung up the phone. “Man, what a baby.”

“Who was that?” I asked.

“Mitchell,” Wade said.

“He’s mad we left him,” Jack said. “He has no idea what he missed.”

“Lucky him,” Wade said.

“Does Mitchell have a computer?” I asked.

“Mitchell has everything,” Wade said, shaking his head. “His old man’s loaded.”

“He’ll be here in fifteen,” Jack said.

“I’m going inside the truck stop,” I said. “McKenna needs something to drink. We might as well get something to eat. Everyone’s starving.”

“Yeah, the pizza didn’t quite make it,” Jack said.

Fortunately the guards hadn’t taken my money. The three of us went inside the mini-mart, and I grabbed a plastic tote and filled it with six bottles of water and a six-pack of Gatorade. I also got two boxes of powdered jelly doughnuts, licorice, and a handful of PowerBars while Wade put together a dozen hot dogs. Jack grabbed a bag of beef jerky and pork rinds.

We paid for the food, then brought it back to the van. Jack stayed outside to wait for Mitchell while Wade and I carried everything in through the front cab.

“Thank goodness,” Ostin said as we came in. I handed him the box of doughnuts. He tore it open, shoved a doughnut in his mouth, coughed from the powdered sugar, then grabbed a second doughnut and passed the box along to Ian.

McKenna took two bottles of Gatorade from me and, to all of our surprise, downed both of them, stopping only twice to breathe. After she’d emptied both bottles she sighed with relief. “Sorry. Heating up dehydrates me like crazy.”

I sat down on the bench and opened my licorice. I offered some to Taylor.

“Thanks,” she said, taking a strand. She pulled her knees up to her chest. “So what’s going on?”

“Jack called his friend Mitchell. He’s coming to pick us up.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll hide out at his place until we’ve uploaded the rest of Grace’s information. Once we know where my mother is, we’ll make our plan.”

“What if there’s no information about her?”

I frowned. “I don’t know. I have to hope there is.”

“Hey,” shouted a voice from the back of the truck. “How about some water?”

It was the guard Wes. Zeus stood up, carrying one of the bottles with him. “You want some water, Wes?”

The guard looked at Zeus in horror. Zeus poured what was left in his bottle over the guard’s head. The guard sputtered a little as it washed over his nose and mouth.

“See, Wes. I haven’t lost my sense of humor,” Zeus said, electricity sparking between his hands. “And I’m going to prove it to you.”

The guard’s eyes widened.

“Zeus,” I said.

Zeus looked back at me.

“Don’t.”

“What? You didn’t see what he did to me?”

“Yeah, I did.” I looked Wes in the face. “It was cruel. But we’re not like them. We’re better than them.”

“Maybe you are,” Zeus said. “But I’m not.” He lifted his hands, and Wes shut his eyes, preparing to be shocked. But it never happened. Zeus had caught sight of Abigail, who looked horrified. Zeus sighed. “All right,” he said. “All right.” He looked at the guard. “You’re lucky these guys are better than us.”

I leaned back on the bench, closing my eyes.

“What’s that?” Ostin asked.

“What’s what?”

“That.” He pointed to my butt.

Taylor started laughing as she pulled something off me. It was a refrigerator magnet in the shape of an Idaho Spud with the words IDAHO COUCH POTATO printed across it. “How is that sticking to you?” she said.

“Wait,” I said, taking it back from her. I put it on my stomach. It stuck. Then she peeled it off me and placed it against my cheek. It stuck there too.

“Wow,” Taylor said. “You’re like a magnet.”

Ostin stared in amazement. “Not *like*. He *is* a magnet. Doesn’t surprise me with all that electricity running through him.”

“But I’ve had electricity in me my whole life. Why am I suddenly magnetic, too?”

“You must still be getting more electric.”

The words hit me like a bucket of ice water. I felt as if I’d just been told I had less time to live.

“But why is he becoming magnetic?” Taylor asked.

Ostin rubbed his chin. “Let’s see,” he said slowly. “How do I explain this to a cheerleader?”

Taylor bristled. “How would you like a *cheerleader* to permanently scramble your brain?”

“No, don’t!” Ostin said, holding his hands in front of him as if he could block her waves.

“She’s not going to do that,” I said.

“Don’t count on it,” Taylor said.

Ostin still looked terrified. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

I shook my head. "Just explain the magnetism."

"Okay," he said. "It works like this. Electric currents are magnetic. When you coil an electrical current around a core, the magnetism becomes stronger. In your case, your body is the core, and as you have millions of nerves and veins, which are carrying your electricity, it creates a massive coil. So it makes sense that you're becoming magnetic."

"Great. So now I'm going to have things sticking to me?"

"Like me," Taylor said, taking my hand.

I couldn't help but smile.

Just then Jack shouted through the front door, "Come on, our ride is here!"

"What do we do with the guards?" Taylor asked.

"Leave them," I said.

"Tied up?"

"Yeah. Someone will find them eventually."

Outside, Mitchell was standing next to Jack, watching everyone climb out of the truck. "Who are all these people?"

"Friends of mine," Jack said.

He pointed at me. "You're the kid who shocked us."

"His name is Michael," Jack said.

He turned back to Jack. "You took him instead of me?"

"Listen, Mitch. I'll tell you what's going on later. But right now we've got to get out of here before they find us."

"Before *who* finds you?" Mitchell asked.

"I'll tell you when we get to your house."

"We're going to my house?"

"Yeah. We need a place to hide out for a few days. Are your parents home?"

"They're never home."

A large FedEx truck pulled in next to us.

"We gotta go, Mitch," Jack said. "C'mon, everyone. Get in."

Jack and Mitchell climbed in the front, and Jack rolled down the window. "Hey, Abi. Want to sit up here?"

She smiled at him. "Thanks, but I better sit next to Zeus. He's still in pain."

“Right,” Jack said, sounding disappointed.

“I’ll sit up front,” Wade said. “The three amigos ride again.”

“Nah,” Jack said. “You’re too big. How about you, Grace?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

Zeus opened the tailgate and climbed into the narrow space between the backseat and the door. Abigail walked up next to him. “Do you mind if I sit here with you?”

His eyes brightened. “No, of course not.” He scooted back as Abigail climbed in.

As I shut the tailgate, I noticed that two truck drivers were standing in the dark near the back of the van, examining the shredded lift. One of them pointed to the bullet holes.

“Really, it’s time to go, guys,” I said, climbing into the middle seat with Ian and Taylor. Ostin, Wade, and McKenna were in the row behind us.

“Hit it,” Jack said.

Mitchell pulled out of the truck stop and headed east toward the freeway.

As we were climbing the freeway on-ramp, I said, “Hey, McKenna saved the day back there. Give it up for McKenna.”

Everyone clapped.

“Thanks,” McKenna said. “But everyone helped. Ostin distracted the guard.”

“Thanks,” Ostin said, looking pretty pleased. “I just saw an oppor—”

“And how about Jack’s driving?” Taylor said, interrupting Ostin’s speech.

“All in a day’s work,” Jack said.

Ostin turned to McKenna. “That really was awesome how you did that. How hot can you get?”

“At the Elgen laboratory they measured me at about two thousand Kelvin.”

“Holy cannoli,” Ostin said. “Two thousand Kelvin!”

“Who’s Kelvin?” Wade asked.

Ostin rolled his eyes. “Kelvin is a thermodynamic temperature scale. Two thousand Kelvin is more than three thousand degrees

Fahrenheit. That's almost twice as hot as fire." He turned back to McKenna. "You *are* hot. In more ways than one."

"Thanks," she said, smiling.

I didn't have to turn back to know Ostin was blushing.

"So much for your 'voice,'" Jack said.

I frowned. "I know. I'm sorry, everyone. He seemed legit."

"I believed him too," Taylor said.

"I would have put money on it," Ostin said. "I mean, it still makes no sense. Why would they have gone to the trouble of getting us cars, leaving money for us, and then attacking us? Why didn't they just trap us at the salon or along the road?"

"Maybe it was too public," Taylor said.

"True," I said. "But they could have attacked us when we got the cars. There was no one around."

Ostin added, "And those guards acted like they'd never seen your cell phone before."

"And why did they ask where we got the Hummers?" Abigail said.

"What are you guys talking about?" Mitchell asked.

"You have no idea how much you don't know," Jack said.



It was nearly midnight when we reached Mitchell's house. Even though Wade had said that Mitchell's dad was "loaded," I didn't realize just how well-off his family was until I saw his place. He lived in a massive, well-lit two-story Colonial-style house with tall gothic columns in front, wings on each side, and a cobblestone driveway that wound past a carefully manicured yard up to a fountain and front door.

"This is Mitchell's house?" I said.

"It looks like the White House," Ostin said.

"Is the butler going to answer the door?" McKenna said.

"We don't have a butler," Mitchell said. "He quit."

Jack said, "We're going to be hanging out in the pool house."

"You have a pool?" Ostin asked.

"He's got a pool *and* a pool house," Wade replied.

There was a four-car garage to the side of the house, and Mitchell opened the third door by remote and pulled in. When the door had shut behind us, Mitchell said to Jack, "Okay, what's going on? You said you'd tell me."

"Let's go inside first," Jack said. "We don't know if we were followed."

Mitchell looked afraid. "Who's following you?"

"Bad people you don't want to meet," Jack said.

"They won't come here, will they?"

"Only if they find out we're here," Grace said.

Mitchell turned to Jack. "She's kidding, right?"

Jack shook his head. "Nope."

We got out of the car, and I opened the tailgate for Zeus and Abigail. As they got out, Zeus put his hand on Abigail's back. "Thanks, Abi."

She smiled. "Anytime."

Jack was standing on the other side of the car looking at them. I could tell he was bothered.

"This way," Mitchell said. "The pool house is in back."

The pool house was located behind the main home, next to a large barbecue area with an atrium and a rock fountain. The backyard looked like something out of a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine. I didn't know Idaho even had places like that.

The house had an electric keypad entry, and Mitchell pressed a few buttons, then pushed open the door. Inside, we all looked around in amazement.

"Your pool house is bigger than my whole house," Taylor said. "Way bigger."

The pool house was two stories high with a loft and an outdoor balcony. Mitchell gave us a quick tour. On the main floor was a large, open dining room, kitchen, bathroom, master bedroom, and two guest rooms. Upstairs, in the loft, was a television room with a fifty-one-inch plasma TV, two beanbag chairs, a long, wraparound sofa, and a foosball table. On the far side of the room, past the sofa, were two bedrooms connected by a bathroom. The walls were covered with paintings of lighthouses.

"It even smells good," Abigail said. "Like flowers."

"I could live here," Taylor said, still looking around.

"It's almost as nice as the academy," Zeus said.

"That would depend on which floor of the academy you're talking about," Ian said. Abigail and McKenna nodded in agreement.

“There are extra quilts, pillows, and sleeping bags in that closet,” Mitchell said.

“The girls can sleep up here,” I said. “We can stay downstairs.”

“We only need two rooms,” Taylor said. “Grace and I can share a room and McKenna and Abigail can take the other.”

“I can sleep on the couch up here,” Zeus said.

“That’s okay,” Jack said. “That’s Wade’s and my spot.” He glanced over at Abigail, and she smiled at him.

Zeus looked back and forth between the two. “Whatever, dude.”

“Anyone hungry?” Taylor asked. “That hot dog was gross.”

“Can we order pizza again?” Grace said. “Maybe we’ll get to eat it this time.”

“I don’t think we need to,” Ian said with a curious expression.

“Why is that?” I asked.

He raised his hand. “Wait for it . . .”

A doorbell rang.

Mitchell looked at him quizzically. “That was the main house doorbell. How did you know it was going to ring?”

“Psychic,” he said.

“Who is it?” I asked Ian.

“Pizza delivery. The guy has like six boxes.”

“Did you order pizza?” Jack asked Mitchell.

“No,” Mitchell said. “I didn’t even know you were coming.”

“Everyone better hide,” I said. “Ian, Zeus, Ostin, and I will check this out. Mitchell, it’s your house. You better get the door.”

“I better come too,” Jack said.

“No, you and Taylor should stay back with the rest in case it’s another trap. They’ll need you.”

The doorbell rang again as we walked past the pool and in through the main house’s back door.

“He’s alone,” Ian said. “It looks clean.”

“How are you doing this?” Mitchell asked.

“I told you,” Ian said with a grin. “I’m psychic.”

Ian, Zeus, Ostin, and I ducked into Mitchell’s father’s office next to the front door, where we could see Mitchell but not the deliveryman. Zeus raised his hands, electricity snapping between his fingers.

“Take it easy,” I said.

“Just being prepared,” he replied.

Mitchell glanced over at us nervously, then opened the door. “Hey.”

“Got your pizza,” the voice said. “Also your garlic-cheese bread, a cinnamon dessert pizza, and two liters of soda.”

“We didn’t order any pizza,” Mitchell said.

There was a pause. “Isn’t this 2724 Preston Street? The Manchester residence?”

“Yeah. That’s us.”

“Then it’s your pizza. And it’s already been paid for. Except my tip. And this stuff was heavy.”

“All right,” Mitchell said, pulling out his wallet. “Just set them there.”

We all moved back from the door as the guy stepped in and laid the stack of boxes on the foyer table. The deliveryman wasn’t what I expected—he looked older than my mom and had hair longer than Taylor’s. There were six boxes in all. Mitchell handed him a bill.

“Thanks,” the man said as he walked out.

Mitchell shut the door. I watched out the window as the guy got in his car and drove off.

“Anything look suspicious in the car?” I asked Ian as we walked out to the foyer.

“No. It’s a mess.”

“Who do you think sent the pizza?” Zeus asked.

Just then something started to buzz in one of the boxes. “What’s that?” Mitchell asked.

“It’s a bomb!” Ostin shouted.

“Hit the deck!” Mitchell yelled, dropping to the ground.

Zeus, Ian, and I just stood there.

“It’s not a bomb,” Ian said. “It’s a phone. Second box from the bottom.”

Mitchell looked up from the floor. “How do you do that?”

Zeus lifted the top pizzas off, and I opened the box and took out the buzzing phone. It was identical to the one I’d received from the woman at the tanning salon.

“Are you going to answer it?” Ostin asked.

“Do you think I should?”

He shrugged. “Your call. Literally.”

I pushed the answer button, then held the phone to my ear.
“Hello?”

“Michael. It’s me.” It was the *voice* again.

“You tricked us.”

“We didn’t trick you. That was a safe house.”

“You call that ‘safe’?”

“We don’t know how they found you. Someone in your group might be tipping them off.”

“You’re saying one of us is a traitor?”

“Maybe. An Elgen plant.”

“I trust them more than I do you,” I said. “I’m hanging up.”

“Please don’t hang up. We need to talk.”

“What are you doing, tracing this call?”

“We already know where you are. We sent the pizza.”

I felt stupid. “Oh yeah.”

“If you look out the window you’ll see two white, windowless service vans parked across the street. They’re ours. They’re guarding the house.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Do you know what happened to the third Elgen car?”

“What?”

“The third Elgen car. The one that was about to blow up the van you were in. You don’t believe that car just blew up on its own?”

I didn’t know what had happened to the car. None of us did. I wondered how he knew about it.

“We did it,” he said. “You did an amazing job of escaping, Michael. All of you did. You just needed a little help at the end.”

“If you’re with us, why didn’t you just stop them from capturing us to begin with?”

“Anonymity is our most valuable weapon. If the Elgen had gotten you to the airport, we would have been forced to attack. But it was our last resort. Thankfully we didn’t have to. After you destroyed the first two cars, we knew they’d assume you destroyed the third.”

My mind was reeling. I didn't know what to believe. "How do they keep finding us?"

"Like I said, we don't know. We knew that the Elgen were tracking your cars. We thought once you traded cars they'd lose you. Unfortunately, we were wrong."

"We noticed," I said sarcastically. "How are *you* following us?"

"The old-fashioned way. We've been following you since Pasadena." The voice paused. "Are there any GPs with you?"

"No," I said. "We let them all go in California."

"All of them?"

"Of course, we don't have room for . . ." I stopped. "Jack and Wade were GPs."

"That's how they're doing it," the voice said. "The GPs are all implanted with subdermal RFIDs. You'll have to get rid of them."

I didn't understand. "Get rid of Jack and Wade? Or get rid of the subthermal R-F-I . . ."

"Subdermal RFIDs," the voice said quickly. "Your friend Ostin will know what they are. And the answer is either. I'm afraid my time's up."

"Wait. Do you know what happened to Ostin's parents?"

Ostin looked at me.

"They're safe, and we have a man watching over Taylor's house as well. You saw our van as you drove by her house yesterday afternoon."

"What about Jack's house?"

"We didn't know about him, so we weren't prepared." The receiver went dead. I put the phone in my pocket.

"What did he say?" Ostin asked.

"Your parents are okay."

"Where are they?"

"He didn't say."

Ostin looked confused. "That's good, right?"

"I hope so. What's a subdermal RFID?"

"Subdermal' means beneath the skin. RFIDs are radio frequency identification devices." His eyes widened. "Holy cow, is that how they've been following us? Did they implant everyone with them?"

"He only said the GPs."

“What about the electric kids?”

“They tried,” Ian said. “But our electricity interferes with the frequency.”

“RFIDs,” Ostin repeated. “So that’s how they’re following us.”

“What do they look like?” I asked.

“You’ve seen them before,” Ostin said. “Stores put them in books and video games to catch shoplifters. It’s a little square foil thing, usually about the size of a postage stamp. But I’ve read that some new, high-tech RFIDs are the width of a human hair. They can almost make them like powder. There’s even talk of making them digestible.”

“Why would they do that?” Ian asked.

“Think about it,” Ostin said, suddenly looking excited. “You could put them in restaurant food, then when you go to check out, they’ll scan your stomach and charge you for what you ate.”

“That’s . . . weird,” Mitchell said.

“That’s the future,” Ostin replied.

“How do they implant these things?” I asked.

“They inject them,” Ian said. “In a shot. I’ve seen them do it.”

“We need to get rid of them,” I said.

“Jack and Wade?” Zeus asked hopefully.

“No,” I said. “The tracking devices.” I lifted half the pizzas. “We better get back to the others.”

Jack, Taylor, and Wade met us by the pool.

“What happened?” Taylor asked. “Who sent the pizzas?”

“I’ll tell you inside,” I said. We carried the food into the pool house and set it on the kitchen table. “The voice sent the pizzas. And he sent us another phone.”

“What did the *voice* have to say?” Jack said angrily. “Sorry we *almost* killed you?”

“He said they didn’t do it. He said that they were the ones who blew up the third Elgen car so we could escape.”

“Do you believe him?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t know. I mean, the Elgen wouldn’t blow up their own car, and we sure didn’t do it. And if they know we’re here, why didn’t they just attack us?”

“Because we kicked their butts last time,” Jack said.

“No,” Taylor said. “If they’re still trying to capture us, it would be better for them if we didn’t know that they knew where we are.”

“What?” Wade said.

“Precisely,” Ostin said. “First rule of war, never give up the element of surprise.”

I said, “The voice said he thinks they know how the Elgen have been following us.” I looked at Jack. “They think that you and Wade were implanted with tracking devices.”

Jack’s brow furrowed. “Implanted where?”

“When the guards took you prisoner, did they give you a shot?” Ostin asked.

“Oh yeah,” Wade said. “And that needle was wicked big. It stung worse than a hornet.”

“Did they tell you what the shot was for?” Ostin asked.

Jack shook his head. “No, they weren’t real talkative. Why?”

“GPs are implanted with a subdermal RFID so they can be tracked if they escape,” I said. “That includes you and Wade.”

“A what?” Jack asked.

“It’s a radio frequency identification device,” Ostin said. “They use them to track people. And they’re small enough that they can be injected into the body.”

“The voice told you this?” Jack asked skeptically.

I nodded. “He thinks the Elgen have been using the RFIDs to track us.”

“Wait,” Taylor said. “If that’s true, then they can still find us.”

Mitchell looked at her. “What will they do if they find us?”

“They burned down my house,” Jack said.

Mitchell’s eyes widened. “If something happens to the house, my parents will kill me.”

“If the Elgen find us,” Jack said, “they’ll kill you for real.”

Mitchell turned pale. “You’ve got to get out of here. All of you.”

“No, just Jack and Wade have to get out of here,” Zeus said.

“But they’ll capture us,” Wade said.

“It’s you or *all of us*, moron,” Zeus said.

“Watch your mouth,” Jack said.

“We’re in this together,” I said. “There’s got to be another solution.”

“Wait,” Ostin said. “There is. Mitchell, do you have any aluminum foil?”

“In the pantry.”

“Get it. Quick. The thicker the better.”

He started walking toward the kitchen.

“Run!” Jack said.

“Okay.” He ran out of the room.

“Aluminum foil?” I said.

“We can wrap them in foil. It will block the frequency.”

Taylor stifled a laugh. “They’ll look like baked potatoes.”

“I’m not going to wear foil,” Wade said.

“Maybe you prefer the Elgen jumpsuits,” Jack said.

Wade nodded. “Actually, I have always looked good in silver.”

Mitchell returned with two boxes of foil. “Here.”

“Someone help me wrap them,” Ostin said.

“I’ll help,” Taylor said.

“Where did you get the shot?” Ostin asked.

“At the Elgen Academy,” Wade said.

Jack shook his head. “In our arms. Our left arms.”

Ostin and Taylor wrapped Jack’s and Wade’s left arms and shoulders with foil.

“I take it back,” Taylor said. “You don’t look like baked potatoes. You look like the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“Yeah,” Zeus said. “I’ll get you a funnel for your head.”

“And I’ll shove your greasy head through it,” Jack said.

The two of them glared at each other.

Abigail stepped between them, then said to Jack. “I think you look like a knight in shining armor.”

Zeus shook his head and turned away.

“At least there are no more radio frequencies,” Ostin said.

Jack smoothed the foil down on his shoulder. “We can’t walk around like this for the rest of our lives.”

“He’s right,” I said. “Can’t we just run a magnet over it like you do with a credit card?”

“That won’t do anything,” Ostin said. “You’ve got to really crush it. Like hit it with a hammer.”

“We can’t hit anyone with a hammer,” I said.

“Yeah,” Wade said, looking pale. “That wouldn’t be good.”

“You’re right,” Ostin said. “It wouldn’t be efficient. You’d crush bones long before it damaged the chip.”

“Can we cut it out?” Jack asked.

Wade’s eyes widened. “What?”

“You could do that,” Ostin said. “If you could find it.”

“What?” Wade said again. “You want to cut it out of my arm, like with a *knife*?”

Jack walked to the kitchen and returned with a steak knife. He handed it to me. “Cut it out.”

Wade stared, his eyes wide with fear. “Please don’t.”

“Is there any other way to break them?” I asked.

“You can microwave them,” Ostin said. “But even if Wade fit in a microwave, he’d probably explode.”

Wade was speechless.

“What about an EMP?” Zeus said. “Quentin used to blow out RFID readers at toll booths just to cause traffic jams.”

“What’s an EMP? Taylor asked.

“Electromagnetic pulse,” Ostin said. “A high-frequency electromagnetic burst could overload the RFID’s antenna and blow out the chip.” He thought for a moment. “A quick electric surge could knock it out. But you’d have to be right above the RFID. And we don’t know where it is.”

“Ian can find it,” I said, looking at him. “Can’t you?”

“If I knew what I was looking for. What does it look like?”

“I’ve never seen one that small, but it would look like a tiny piece of metal,” Ostin said. “Like a sliver. Embedded in flesh it shouldn’t be that hard to find.”

“What about the EMP?” Taylor asked. “Where do you get one of those?”

“A big blast from Michael,” Ostin said.

“Why do all these solutions have to involve some form of torture?” Wade said. “Michael’s done that to me before.”

“He’s shocked you before,” Ostin said. “This would have to be much more powerful.”

“I really don’t mind the foil that much.”

“Quit being such a wimp,” Jack said.

“It’s that or the knife,” Ostin said.

“Enough of this,” Jack said. “Let’s get it over with. I’ll go first.”

“Ian?” I said.

Ian walked up to Jack. “Point to where they gave you that shot.”

Jack peeled back the foil and rolled up his sleeve. He pointed to a spot a few inches down from his shoulder.

We were all quiet as Ian looked at Jack’s arm. “I think I see it. It’s about the size of a sesame seed.”

“What does it look like?” Ostin asked.

He focused his eyes. “It has markings. Almost like . . . fingerprints.”

“That’s it,” Ostin said. “We should mark where it is. Anyone got a pen?”

Mitchell retrieved a fine-tipped marker from a drawer next to the phone. “Here.”

Ostin handed the marker to Ian, who drew a small dot on Jack’s skin. “It’s right there, about a sixteenth to an eighth of an inch in.”

“The subcutaneous level,” Ostin said.

I looked at Jack. “You sure about this?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really,” I said.

“Then I’m sure.”

“You should sit down,” Ostin said. “The shock might knock you out.”

“Right.” Jack walked over to the couch and sat back, his arm on the armrest.

I put my hand on his arm. “Ready?”

“I feel like I’m in the electric chair waiting for them to flip the switch. Don’t count or anything. Just do it.”

“Wait!” Abigail said. “I can help.” She walked over to Jack’s side and put one hand on his shoulder, the other on his neck. “Okay,” she said.

Jack smiled. “Thanks.”

I put my index finger on Ian’s ink dot and closed my eyes. Then I pulsed.

Jack's body heaved and Abigail jumped back with a scream. The spot on Jack's arm was bright red and there was a blister where my finger had touched him.

"Sorry," I said.

It took him a moment to speak. "It was nothing," he said, still looking a little dazed. "I think Abi took most of it." He looked at her. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes were moist with tears, but she nodded.

"Thank you," he said. "I owe you one."

She forced a smile. "You're welcome."

Jack turned to me. "So, did it work?"

"Ian, what do you see?"

Ian looked at Jack's arm. "The thing looks . . . smaller than it was, kind of wrinkled, like it's melted."

"Perfect," Ostin said.

Wade stepped forward. "Guess it's my turn." He pulled the foil back from his arm.

Ian had to look a little longer for his. "What's up with this? You've got a *bunch* of metal in there."

Wade looked stumped for a moment, then said, "Oh. It's probably buckshot. I got in the way of a shotgun when I was little."

"His dad was drunk and took him duck hunting," Jack said.

"There it is." Ian marked the place with the pen.

Abigail put her hand on Wade's shoulder.

"You don't have to do this," Jack said to her.

"I know."

This time I didn't hesitate. I put my finger on the spot and immediately pulsed. The shock wasn't as strong as the first one, but it was strong enough. Abigail cried out as she pulled away, shaking her hand in pain. Tears were rolling down her face. McKenna and Taylor both put their arms around her to comfort her.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"It's not your fault," she replied.

Ian examined Wade's arm. "It looks shriveled too."

Jack wadded up a piece of foil from Wade's arm and threw it at Mitchell. Then he grabbed Wade by the hand and pulled him up.

“You’re the man.”

“That wasn’t so bad,” he said.

“Yeah, because Abi took it,” Taylor said. “How about a thank-you.”

“Sorry,” Wade said. “Thanks.”

“That’s okay,” Abigail said.

“Now that that’s done,” Ostin said, “how about some pizza?”

“I could go for that action myself,” Zeus said.

“Looks like there’s a little of everything,” Grace said, opening the boxes.

“Pineapple and Canadian bacon,” Ostin said. “Score.”

I took a couple of pieces of sausage and pepperoni pizza for Taylor and me, then we sat on the floor in the corner of the room. After we’d taken a few bites she asked, “Now what do we do?”

“We get the information out of Grace.” I looked over at Mitchell. “Hey, Mitchell. Do you have a computer?”

“Like six of them,” he said, his mouth full.

“We need your most powerful one. We’ve got to upload Grace.”

“What’s grace?”

Grace was sitting on the arm of the couch next to him. “I’m Grace,” she said.

Mitchell looked at her. “I don’t get it.”

“They’re uploading me,” she said.

“I’m so confused,” Mitchell said. “Will someone please tell me what’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you,” I said. “Remember when I shocked you?”

“Yeah, like I’d forget that.”

“There are other kids like me with electric powers. Thirteen of them. The people who made us this way, the Elgen, are trying to get us back. That’s why they kidnapped my mother and Taylor.”

“You?” Mitchell said, looking at Taylor.

Taylor nodded.

“She’s electric too,” I said.

“You can shock too?” Mitchell asked.

“Kind of,” she said. “Just your brain.”

“Might be hard with Mitch,” Jack said. “Small target.”

Mitchell made a face.

I continued. "Jack and Wade drove Ostin and me to California to rescue my mother and Taylor."

"Where we were captured and put in cells and tortured," Wade said. "Still wish you had come?"

Mitchell looked at Jack. "The Elgen dudes captured you?"

Jack nodded. "They put these electric collars on us that would shock you if you even talked. But Michael escaped and freed us."

"And the Elgen dudes are the ones looking for you now," Mitchell said.

I nodded. "Yes."

Jack said, "We came back to Idaho to regroup. But the Elgen were waiting for us. They burned down my house."

"Then they recaptured us," Wade said. "But we got away."

"That's where you come in," I said. "The truck you saw us climb out of, that was what they were holding us in."

"You're really not making this up?"

Jack scowled. "Don't be an idiot. You saw the truck, dude. You saw the bullet holes."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"We're hoping Grace has information about my mother," I said. "That's why we need a computer."

Mitchell just stared at me for a moment. "But what if these Elgen guys find us?"

"That's why we had to get rid of the RFIDs," Jack said. "So they won't."

"There's no way they'll find us now," Ostin said.

Just then my phone rang. Everyone turned to look at me as I answered. "Hello."

"Get ready, Michael," the voice said. "The Elgen are here."



“Where are they?” I asked.

Taylor grabbed my arm. At first I thought she was frightened, then I realized she was just listening in.

“They’re one street east of you. There are about a dozen guards in three vehicles. Did you get rid of the GPs?”

“No, but we destroyed the RFIDs,” I said. “At least we think we did.”

“You must have succeeded or else they would have already surrounded the house. They were probably closing in on you, then lost the signal. They’ve got a helicopter and listening devices, so stay inside and no loud talking. Turn up the radio or TV. They’re also going door to door with remote el-readers. They’re sensitive up to thirty feet, so stay away from the front door and outer walls.”

“What are el-readers?” I asked.

“They pick up erratic electrical signals like yours.”

Taylor looked up at the ceiling. “I hear a helicopter.”

“What should we do?” I asked.

“Prepare yourself for battle. Is there someone they won’t recognize who can answer the door when they arrive?”

“Mitchell can,” I said. “It’s his house.”

“*What* are you volunteering me for?” Mitchell asked.

Taylor shushed him.

“We’re positioned on both ends of the street, but we’re outnumbered. We won’t move in unless we have to. It’s best that we don’t engage them, unless you want to turn the whole area into a war zone. I’m guessing they have enough ammunition that they could level the block if they had to. Or at least the house.” The voice paused. “Did you hear that?”

“No.”

“I need to go before they intercept this signal. I’ll call back when it’s clear. Be strong. Good luck.” The phone went dead.

Taylor looked at me, her eyes dark with fear. Everyone else was staring at me as well.

“What?” Ostin and Zeus asked simultaneously.

I lowered my voice to a whisper. “The Elgen are in the neighborhood.”

“They’re in my *neighborhood*?” Mitchell said.

“Quiet,” Taylor whispered. “They have listening devices.”

“Someone turn the TV on,” I said.

“What channel?” Wade asked.

“A noisy one,” I said. “They don’t know where we are. They lost our signal. So they’re going door to door.” I looked at Mitchell. “If they come here, you’re going to have to answer the door.”

He turned white. “Why me?”

“Because they have machines that can detect us and you’re not one of us.”

“How about we just don’t answer the door?” he said.

“Then they’ll search your place, and if they pick up our el-waves . . .”

“But what’s going to stop them from forcing their way in?”

“Look,” I said. “They have a lot of houses to check. They won’t attack if they don’t think we’re here. So just act normal and nothing will happen.”

Mitchell just stared at me blankly. “Act normal? They’re going to kill us!”

Jack put his arm around him. "Listen, Mitch. It's cage time in the Octagon. Wipe that fear off your face. You're a warrior. No fear."

Mitchell took a deep breath. "Right. No fear."

"Jack, you're going to have to be his backup."

"Wade, Mitch, and I got it," he said. "And you." He pointed to Ostin.

Ostin looked around. "Me?"

"Yes, you. We might need your smarts."

"We'll need to know what's going on," I said.

"I'll be watching," Ian said.

"I know. But it would be better if we could hear what they're saying." I turned to Mitchell. "Does your house have an intercom system?"

"Yeah, but I'm not sure how to work it."

"I'll figure it out," Ostin said. "Just show me where it is."

"Set it so we can listen from the loft in the pool house."

"Done," Ostin said.

"All right," I said. "Good luck, everyone."

* * *

Ostin turned the front door's intercom on so we could listen to what was happening. It was about twenty minutes before the doorbell rang. We heard the door open.

"Whassup, guys?" Mitchell said.

"We're sorry to disturb you at this hour, but we're from Homeland Security. There's no need to panic, but we've received a report that there is a radiation leak in the area. For your safety, we need to check the radiation levels of your house."

"Liars," Taylor whispered.

Mitchell said, "Radiation? Someone got a bomb around here?"

"No, sir. It's not a bomb. It may be nothing at all. May we please come in?"

"Uh, my parents are out, and they'd freak if I let strangers in. You got a warrant or something?"

“No, sir, Homeland Security doesn’t need warrants. This is for your safety. We don’t need your permission to enter your home.”

There was a long pause. “Come on, Mitchell,” I said. “Think of something.”

“Look, I just got my little sister to bed. Why don’t you come back tomorrow?”

“It will only take a few minutes, sir.”

“Come on, guys. It took me an hour to get her down.”

We heard a high voice say, “Mitchie, who is it?”

“Mitchie?” Zeus whispered.

“Was that Ostin?” I asked.

Taylor shrugged. “He kind of pulled it off.”

“Just some government guys!” Mitchell shouted. “Go back to sleep!” Pause. “Really, guys. I’m sure there’s no radiation around here, or I’d be glowing or something, right? Just come back in the morning.”

“Do you mind if we check around back?”

Taylor and I looked at each other.

There was a long pause. “No problem,” Mitchell said. “Help yourself.”

A different voice said, “I’m not pulling a reading.”

“Nothing?”

“No.”

“All right. Looks like you’re good. Thank you, sir.”

“Yeah. No problem. Come back when my parents are here.”

We heard the door shut and lock.

“He handled that surprisingly well,” I said.

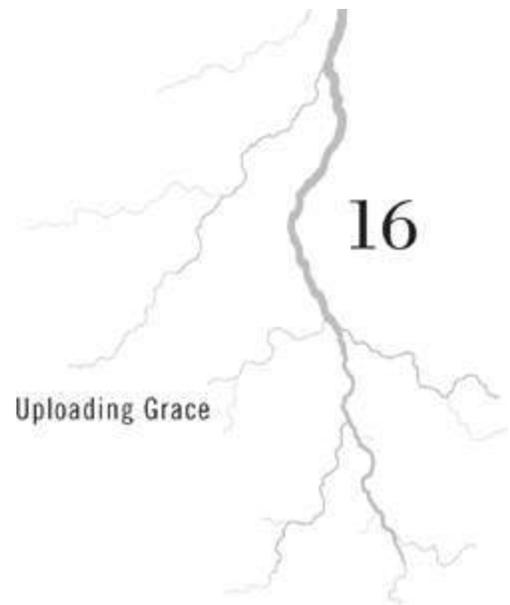
“You think that girl’s voice was Ostin?” Taylor asked.

“Probably Jack,” Zeus said.

“You’re so mean,” Abigail said.

I looked at Abigail. She was smiling at Zeus.

“I don’t like where that is headed,” Taylor whispered to me. “I see a collision coming.”



Ian watched the guards until they left Mitchell's street and started on the next. A few minutes later Jack and the rest walked back into the pool house. Jack had his arm around Mitchell, who was beaming like a conquering hero.

"How'd I do?" Mitchell asked.

"You should win an Academy Award for that performance," Taylor said. "So who was the girl calling for 'Mitchie'?"

"That was me," Jack said.

"Told you," Zeus said to Abigail.

Jack scowled at him.

"Okay," Abigail said. "Can we go to bed now? I'm exhausted."

"Me too," McKenna said.

I looked at Taylor. She grinned. "Me three."

"Someone's got to stand watch." I looked around the group. "Anyone not tired?"

No one said anything. Finally, Jack looked at Zeus. "If no one else is going to man up, I'll do it."

"I'll do it," Ostin said.

I looked at him in surprise. Ostin was one of those guys who always went to bed at the same time and always before ten.

“Really?” I asked.

“If we can upload Grace, I’ll stay up and go through the files.”

Grace had been so quiet I’d almost forgotten she was there. She took a deep breath. “Let’s get it over with.”

* * *

While everyone else got ready for bed, Ostin, Grace, Taylor, Jack, and I followed Mitchell to his room on the second floor of the main house. Not surprisingly, his room was huge—larger than my room and my mother’s combined. It was also a mess, strewn with clothing, cracker boxes, and candy wrappers. The walls were covered with magazine pictures of cage fighters and *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models.

There was a large, beige computer next to his desk with a huge monitor on the desktop. Ostin was drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

“That’s a custom Alienware Aurora,” Ostin said. “Maybe the best gaming computer ever built. It looks brand-new. Have you even used it?”

Mitchell shook his head. “Nah. My dad bought it for my birthday. I’m not really into computers that much.”

“He means he doesn’t know how to turn it on,” Jack said.

“Neither do you,” Mitchell said.

“I would kill for one of these,” Ostin said, sitting down at the keyboard. He fired it up and the screen’s glow lit his face. “Let’s go, Grace.”

“You’re not going to break it, are you?” Mitchell asked.

“Would you even know if we did?” Ostin said.

Mitchell just looked at him.

Ostin rolled his eyes. “No, we’re not going to break it.”

Grace sat down in a chair next to the computer. She took a deep breath, put her hands on top of the CPU, then closed her eyes and began to concentrate. Files began filling the computer as sweat beaded on her forehead. Just a minute into the upload she began to shake and her eyes rolled back into her head like before.

“That’s creepy,” Mitchell said.

“No it’s not,” Taylor said indignantly.

“Shh,” Ostin said. “You’re slowing her down.”

It took nearly five minutes for Grace to upload everything. When she was done she fell forward onto her knees, panting heavily like an athlete just completing a sprint.

Taylor put her hand on Grace’s shoulder and knelt down next to her. “Good job.”

Ostin just stared at the screen. “Mitchell, do you have a pen and paper?”

“We’ve got some downstairs.”

“I’m going to need a whole pad. Actually a couple. Is there paper in your printer?”

“What printer?”

“Just get the pen and paper, Einstein,” Jack said.

I checked the printer drawer. “Looks full.”

Ostin continued examining the file names, shaking his head in wonderment. “That’s a lot of data. It’s going to take me all night. At least.”

Mitchell returned. “Here’s your pen and paper,” he said, setting two yellow writing pads on the desk next to Ostin.

“You’re sure about this?” I asked. “I can stay up if you want.”

“I’m good,” Ostin said. “Everyone can go to bed.”

“This *is* my bed,” Mitchell said.

“Not tonight it’s not,” Jack said. “Ostin’s got work to do.”

“A few terabytes’ worth.” Ostin said this more to himself than us, and I could tell that he’d already started to slip off into his own world. I don’t think he even noticed when we left.



“Michael.”

I opened my eyes to see Ostin standing over me. I had fallen asleep on the couch on the main floor of the pool house, and sunlight was streaming in through the blinds above me.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Morning,” Ostin said, looking very tired.

I rubbed my eyes. “Did you stay up all night?”

“I found your mother.”

Suddenly I was wide awake. “You found her?”

“She’s in Peru. I found her file on the computer.”

“Peru? Show me.” I pulled on my T-shirt and grabbed the cell phone.

We were walking to the front door when Taylor called to me. “Michael.”

I looked up. She was leaning over the loft railing. “What’s going on?”

“Ostin found my mother,” I said.

“I’ll be right there.” Taylor hurried down the stairs and joined us at the door. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure she was there when Grace downloaded the information,” Ostin said. “They could have moved her.”

“How did you find her?” I asked.

“I tracked her through their internal travel logs. I started with the date she disappeared, then went from there.”

Taylor and I followed Ostin back to Mitchell’s room.

“Is anyone else awake yet?” I asked Taylor.

“No. Everyone was exhausted.”

“They should be,” I said.

We walked into Mitchell’s room.

“I’ve got a feeling things are going to get even crazier,” Ostin said, pointing to a picture of my mother on the screen.

My heart froze at the sight of her. She looked tired and frightened and was wearing an Elgen jumpsuit.

“She’s being held at the Elgen Starxource plant in Puerto Maldonado, Peru.”

“Isn’t that where the fire rats escaped?” Taylor asked.

“Exactly,” Ostin said. “It’s a jungle town in the Amazon rain forest.”

“How long has she been there?” I asked. I noticed I was ticking but didn’t bother to try to control it.

“The travel records show that she was transported to Peru directly from Idaho.”

“How do we get to Peru?” Taylor asked. “Can we drive?”

“I’m not sure. We’d have to go through Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador and halfway through Peru.”

Taylor just stared at him. “How do you know all that?”

“Geography is my strong subject,” Ostin said.

“Everything is your strong subject,” Taylor said.

“We’re going to have to fly,” I said.

“All of us?”

“We might have enough money,” I said.

“You can’t just fly into a foreign country,” Ostin said. “There’s customs and border control. Do you even have a passport?”

I had never traveled outside the country, so I hadn’t thought of any of that. “That will be a problem.”

“Not our biggest one,” Ostin said. “The compound she’s being held in is a fortress. It’s more prison than energy plant. It’s built on a twenty-five-thousand-acre ranch, and it has hundreds of guards. At least ten times more than what we faced at the academy.”

All the excitement I felt at locating my mother vanished in a puff of impossibility. What good was knowing where she was if we couldn’t reach her? She might as well be on the moon.

I put my head in my hands.

“What do we do now?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. I turned to Ostin. “Do you have any ideas?”

“I think . . . ,” Ostin said. He thought for a moment. “I think I need some sleep.”

I exhaled heavily. “Yeah, get some sleep. Thanks for staying up.”

“No problem,” Ostin said. He lay down on Mitchell’s bed. A feeling of despair permeated the room.

Taylor said, “I know what we should do.”

“What?”

“Get bagels. I need to get out of here.”

After all we’d been through, something as normal as going out for bagels sounded fantastic.

“Maybe Jack or Wade are up by now.”

I looked at Ostin. He had already shut his eyes.

“Do you want something from the bagel place?” I asked.

“Sleep,” he said.

“Wow, you are tired,” Taylor said.

“And a blueberry bagel,” Ostin added. “Or chocolate chip if they have it. With strawberry cream cheese.”

“You got it,” I said. I started for the door, then suddenly stopped and turned back. The picture of my mother was still on the screen.

Taylor took my hand. “Things have a way of working out.”

I looked at her. “My mother used to say that.”



When we walked back into the pool house, Jack was sitting at the kitchen table holding a spoon and eating from a carton of vanilla ice cream. “Where were you guys?”

“With Ostin,” I said. “He found my mother.”

He set down his spoon. “Awesome. Let’s go get her.”

“It’s not that simple,” Taylor said.

“She’s in Peru,” I said.

“Is that in Idaho?” he asked.

Taylor covered her eyes.

“No,” I said. “It’s in South America. They have her locked away in a huge compound.”

“Good,” he said. “I like a challenge.”

“Well, you’ve got one. The first is how we get there.”

“Maybe the *voice* can help us,” he said.

Taylor looked at me. “He’s right. I bet they could fly us there.”

The thought gave me hope. “If they call again.”

“They’ll call,” Taylor said. She turned to Jack. “In the meantime, we’re hungry for bagels. Will you drive us?”

Jack stood. “Sure. I’ll get the keys from Mitchell.”

* * *

The three of us drove about six blocks to Taylor's favorite bagel shop—the Bagelmeister. I had never been to the place before, but I knew it was a hangout for the popular kids.

“Let's go inside,” Taylor said. “It's faster.”

“Wait,” I said. “What if someone recognizes you? They've probably been hanging ‘missing girl’ posters around town.”

“We'll just be a second,” she said. “Besides, all my friends are in school right now.”

“All right,” I said. “But we can't stay.”

I held the door for her as she walked inside. As we walked into the store, Taylor froze. There was a shrill scream. “Guys! It's *Tay!*”

I looked over Taylor's shoulder to see a group of girls. Her friend Maddie was pointing at her. “OMG! It's really you! Where have you been? You are in so much trouble.”

Taylor just stared at them like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming car.

“Reboot them,” I said. “Quick!”

Taylor closed her eyes.

Immediately the entire room froze. I grabbed Taylor's arm and pulled her to the door. As we ducked out of the shop I heard someone say, “I think I just had, like, an aneurysm. . . .”

We ran back to the car. I opened the door and pushed her in.

“That was fast,” Jack said. “Where are the bagels?”

“We've got to get out of here,” I said. “Taylor's friends are inside.”

He looked at Taylor. “Did they see you?”

“Yes, but I rebooted them.”

“Hope it worked.” Jack put the car in reverse, backed up, then squealed out of the parking lot. When we were a couple of blocks away he asked, “Where to now?”

“There's that other bagel place over on Thirty-Third,” I said. “Next to the theater. I think they have a drive-through window. What do you think, Tay?” I looked over. “Taylor?” Her head was down, her eyes covered by her hands. She was crying.

“What's wrong?”

She kept crying. I put my hand on her shoulder. "Taylor?"

She wiped her eyes, then looked up at me. "I just miss my life," she said. "I miss my family. I miss my friends. I miss my mom hiding my Easter basket in the same stupid place every year for the last ten years. I even miss my dad yelling at me for being gone all the time."

I wasn't sure what to say. Jack glanced at me in the rearview mirror with a helpless expression.

After a moment I breathed out heavily. "Maybe it's time you went home."

Her expression turned from sad to angry. "You're trying to get rid of me?"

"No. I just don't want you to be so unhappy."

"We're in this together. All of us are. Besides, we both know the Elgen aren't going to leave me alone just because I gave up. It makes me an easier target."

I held her hand. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. I just needed someone to listen." She wiped her eyes. "Do you have a Kleenex or something?"

"There are some napkins up here," Jack said.

"That works."

Jack handed her a stack of napkins, and she blew her nose and wiped her eyes again.

Just then the cell phone rang. I picked it up, and Taylor took my arm to listen in.

"Hello?"

"Well done last night, Michael," the voice said. "Another potential catastrophe averted."

"We found my mother," I said.

The voice paused. "Are you sure?"

"She's being held in Puerto Maldonado, Peru."

"Their Starxource training compound," the voice said. "Of course. It's their most secure compound—especially as far as Hatch is concerned. He has complete control over the personnel. How do you know she's there?"

"I can't tell you," I said.

"Are you certain your information is correct?"

“We know that she was sent there after she was kidnapped. I’ve seen her file with a picture of her.”

“So you either hacked into their system or, more likely, downloaded the files at the academy.”

I could have kicked myself for divulging so much. I didn’t confirm his guesses, but I began gulping.

“You’re right not to tell anyone,” the voice said. “If Hatch knew that Grace had downloaded those files, he would stop at nothing to hunt her down.”

His words filled me with fear. “I didn’t say anything about Grace.”

“You didn’t have to, Michael. She’s the only one who could have accessed that information before it was destroyed.”

“How do you know it was destroyed?”

“Elgen protocol,” he said. “Does Hatch know that Grace is with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Even if he does, he clearly doesn’t know what she’s carrying. How much of their mainframe did you get?”

“We think all of it.”

“This is a fantastic stroke of luck,” he said. “That information is invaluable to our cause. Where is this data now?”

“It’s on one of the computers at the house.”

“We need to get that information. We’ll send someone over this afternoon to retrieve it. The van we send will be disguised as some type of service vehicle.”

“I didn’t say you could have the information,” I said.

There was a long pause. “What do you mean?”

“I need a ride to Peru.”

“You want to try to rescue your mother?”

“Yes.”

“You do realize that you’re walking into a trap and that Hatch is holding your mother as bait.”

“Probably.”

“Not probably, he is. And once you’re in the compound there’s nothing we can do to help you.”

“I wasn’t planning on your help. I have to take a chance. I have to save her.”

There was another long pause. When he spoke his voice was softer. “I just wanted to make sure that you know what you’re up against. I’ll make the arrangements. It will take me a while. We’ll get you to Peru and provide you with all the information we have on the compound in return for Grace’s information. But we want one more thing. We want Grace.”

Taylor looked at me. She mouthed, “Grace?”

“I can’t turn her over to you.”

“If Hatch catches her, he’ll probably kill her. But he’ll break her first. Then he’ll know exactly how much we know. It will render the information useless.”

I thought over his warning.

“You know I’m right, Michael. Grace can’t help you. Her powers aren’t what you’ll need. And you’ll be putting her life in terrible danger. If you won’t do it for the cause, do it for her sake.”

After another minute I said, “Okay. I’ll ask her. But it’s up to her.”

“Fair enough. Do we have a deal?”

I looked at Taylor and she nodded.

“Okay,” I said. “We have a deal. Send your guy.”



“**W**e’re going to Peru?” asked McKenna, her mouth full of blueberry bagel.

“Isn’t that in Africa?” Wade asked.

“Did you even go to school?” Ostin said.

“Same one you did, loser.”

“Same school, different planet,” Ostin said.

All eleven of us were gathered in the loft eating bagels. I stood in front of the TV with Taylor by my side. “Yes, we’re going to Peru. The voice has promised to take us there.” I looked around the room. “This is going to be very dangerous—even more dangerous than what we risked at the academy. I don’t want you to go unless you’re positive you want to.”

“I’m in,” Jack said immediately. “Wade?”

“I already committed,” he said. “I owe you, Michael.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

“What about you, Mitch?” Jack asked.

“Uh . . .” His eyes darted back and forth between Jack and me. “I think my parents are . . . I think we’re going to be out of town. My dad—”

Jack cut him off. "It's okay, Mitch. It's not your battle. It's probably better that you don't come."

Mitchell looked relieved. "If you say so."

"I'm there," Zeus said.

"In with both feet," Ian said. "Girls?"

Jack and Zeus both looked at Abigail. She shrugged. "I'm coming."

"Me too," McKenna said. "You're going to need me."

"You can count on that," Ostin said.

McKenna turned to Grace. "How about you?"

She looked at us. "I guess I'm in too."

"Actually," I said, "it might be better if you stayed back."

"Why?"

"If Hatch catches you, he'll force you to reveal how much you downloaded. That will jeopardize all the information we already got from them. Plus, you know he won't hold back on your punishment. It's probably best if you're not with us."

"Where will I go?"

"With the voice."

Grace looked at me nervously. "But we don't know who they are."

"I know," I said. "Either way, it's a risk. It's your decision. But if Hatch catches you . . ."

"You know what Hatch does to traitors," Zeus said.

I looked at Zeus. I was afraid for him as well.

Grace looked down for a moment, then said, "All right. I'd probably just be in the way anyway."

"I think it's the smart choice," Taylor said.

"So when do we go?" Zeus asked.

"I don't know."

"Then I have a suggestion," Zeus said. "We need to better prepare ourselves."

"How do we prepare for the unknown?" Ostin asked.

"By practicing our powers."

"Practice?" Ostin said.

"We practiced using them every day in the academy. When I first got there, I could only shock things less than a yard away. Now I can shoot more than fifty yards."

“How do we practice our powers?” Taylor asked.

“By using them. Our powers are like muscles. They get stronger with use. And we need to eat right. We need to eat more bananas. More potassium.”

“There are things with more potassium than bananas,” Ostin said. “Spinach has nearly twice the potassium as bananas.”

“The Elgen scientists would have known that,” Ian said. “There must be something special about bananas.”

“To begin with, they taste a lot better than spinach,” McKenna said.

“Mitchell,” I said. “When do your parents get back?”

“Not until two weeks from tomorrow. They decided to stay an extra four days in Hawaii.”

“By then we should be gone.” I looked around at the group. “So, I guess that’s that. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear something. In the meantime I suggest we take Zeus’s advice and prepare ourselves. Zeus, can you coach us?”

Zeus nodded. “I’m your man.”

* * *

Later that afternoon a white, windowless appliance repair van pulled into Mitchell’s driveway. A husky man wearing a blue jumpsuit came to the door. “I’m here to check your washer,” he said.

“What?” Mitchell asked.

“You know why I’m here,” he said.

“Oh right. Come in.”

The man stepped inside, and Mitchell shut the door behind him. I stepped forward. Zeus, Ian, and Jack stood by my side while Taylor and Ostin stood on the opposite side of the foyer.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

He looked at me apprehensively. “I’ve come for the computer.”

“You can’t have the computer,” I said. “We need it. But we’ve copied the information to a hard drive.”

“That will do,” the man said. “Where is it?”

“Before we give it to you, we need you to sit down.” I pointed to the upholstered chair we’d dragged from the den into the foyer.

The man looked at us suspiciously. "What is this about?"

"We're protecting ourselves," I said. "Now sit down."

His eyes darted back and forth between us. "I'm not sitting anywhere." He started toward the door.

Zeus shot a blue bolt of electricity to the door handle, the sound of which filled the room. The man jumped back. Zeus held up his hands and electricity arced between his fingers. "Try that again and I'll light you up like a Christmas tree."

The man glared at us.

"He's got two guns," Ian said. "One in a shoulder holster, the other on his ankle."

"Put your hands in the air, now," I said firmly.

Zeus stretched his hands forward. "You've got three seconds to comply, man. You go for the guns it's the last thing you'll ever do."

The man looked exasperated. "Look, guys, we're on the same side."

"Then you won't mind if we check your story," I said.

The man hesitated, then slowly raised his hands in the air. "Okay. Do it your way. Whatever you say." He sat in the chair. I walked over and put my hand on his shoulder. "Don't move."

"You know he's got enough amps to make sure you never move again," Ostin said.

"We know what Michael can do," the man said. "Let's just get this over with. The longer I'm here the riskier."

"Jack, take his guns," I said.

Jack pulled the man's guns from the two holsters. "Nice," he said, examining the pieces. "A Glock and a Walther P99."

"I want those back," he said.

Taylor and Ostin walked over to the man. Taylor put her hands on his head while Ostin held out the list of questions he'd written.

"I want you to answer these questions in your mind," Ostin said. He began reading from the list we'd put together as a group, asking each question twice and pausing between each question until Taylor nodded for him to continue.

"Who sent you?"

"Why are you helping us?"

"Did you know we were going to be attacked at the safe house?"

“Did you really blow up the third car?”

“Are you going to help us get to Peru?”

“Are you allies with the Elgen?”

“Are you helping the Elgen?”

“How do you feel about the Elgen?”

“How do you feel about Dr. C. J. Hatch?”

When Ostin had finished reading his list, I looked over at Taylor.
“What do you think?”

“I think he’s on our side.”

Mitchell brought down the hard drive, and I handed it over to the man. “We’ve lived up to our side of the bargain. When do we go to Peru?”

“We’ll call,” he said. “There’s a lot of preparation that needs to happen first.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. Could be a few days, could be a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?”

“This will take some planning. We need to get you as close as possible without them knowing. Be ready and wait for our call.”

He put the hard drive in his bag and locked it. Jack returned the man’s guns. He put them back in their holsters, then walked to the door. “Be ready.”

He saluted me, opened the door, then walked out to his van.



The days we spent waiting for the phone call felt like an eternity. Ian, Zeus, McKenna, Abigail, and Grace didn't have to worry about being recognized in public, but we were pretty sure the Elgen were still lurking about, so they hid out as well. For the next week we mostly sat around the house playing cards and video games or watching television.

We also practiced our powers. My electricity had, as Ostin theorized, continued to increase. So had my magnetism. I was doing things that surprised me. After my first full day of practice, I pulled a bicycle over to me in Mitchell's garage from more than twenty feet away and, even more difficult, opened the refrigerator door from the kitchen table. I have to admit that magnetism was way more fun than shocking people, because it looked like magic and no one got hurt. By carefully varying my power I was even able to levitate objects. I started moving everything I could and quickly learned my own limitations. Magnetism is not like in the superhero movies. I couldn't pull a car toward myself, because a car weighs more than I do. I just ended up pulling myself to the car.

I wasn't the only one practicing my powers. One day McKenna got hot enough that she burned through some carpet and got a lecture

from Mitchell, who was certain his parents would think he was smoking.

Taylor was practicing too. We were sitting around the pool when she showed me one of her new tricks.

“Are you still going to kiss me?” she asked.

I looked around, feeling a little confused. I couldn’t remember what we were talking about or even offering her a kiss. “Sorry.” I leaned forward and kissed her.

She laughed as she pulled away. “I’m sorry, but you said you wanted a demonstration.”

“I wanted a demonstration of what?”

She cocked her head to one side.

“Did you just reboot me?”

She nodded. “You asked me to. I’ll remind you of what we were talking about. Watch.” She turned to Wade, who was standing a few yards from us holding a piece of pizza in his hand. She put one hand to her temple. Wade paused midbite, then looked up with a dazed expression.

“Well?” Taylor said to him.

He looked at her with a blank gaze. “What?”

“Are you still going to give me that piece of pizza?”

He glanced around. “Oh, yeah. Sorry.” He walked over and held out the piece to Taylor.

“You can keep it,” she said. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Thanks,” he said, looking even more confused than before.

She turned to me and grinned. “See? That’s the second time I’ve made him do that. You just don’t remember the first time. And that’s how I got you to kiss me. I’ve discovered that people are especially vulnerable to suggestion after I reboot them. The more confused they are, the more willing they are to believe others.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “Like, if you’re lost, you’ll trust a complete stranger to tell you where to go.”

“Exactly. I’m also getting better at rebooting too. Watch this.”

She focused on Mitchell, who was standing next to Jack on the opposite side of the pool. Suddenly he put his hands to his temples and groaned. “Ow.”

“I can fill their heads so they can’t think at all. It gives them a little headache. I think if I did it really hard, I could make someone faint.”

“That could come in handy,” I said.

“I’m going to keep working on it.”

“I’ve been working on something too,” I said. “Want to see?”

“Yeah.”

I held my hand out toward Mitchell. My hand began shaking. Mitchell started to walk sideways toward the edge of the pool, as if he was being dragged, which, incidentally, he was.

“Hey, what the . . .”

Then he fell into the water. He popped up to the surface, sputtering and flailing. “Who pushed me?” he shouted. “Who pushed me?”

Jack was laughing. “No one, you idiot.”

Taylor burst out laughing. “You really just did that?”

I was grinning. “I locked onto his belt buckle. Cool, right?”

“Way cool.”

“Kylee can do that,” Zeus said.

I looked back, unaware that Zeus had been watching.

“She can climb metal walls too.”

“Climb walls?”

“It’s just timing. Like using suction cups. Lock onto the wall with magnets, then release one hand and the opposite leg at the same time and move them up, lock on and repeat.”

“That would be cool,” I said. “If I could find some metal walls.”

* * *

While we practiced our powers, the nonelectrics did too. Jack did like a thousand push-ups a day, went on a strict diet of raw-egg-and-protein drinks, and practiced hand-to-hand combat and ultimate fighting techniques with Wade and Mitchell, who seemed more like punching bags than opponents and every day sported fresh bruises.

Ostin researched. He dug through Grace’s information like a gold miner at the mother lode. Within days he had pulled up everything

the mainframe had on the Peruvian compound, including an early architectural drawing of the facility.

He spent most of his time looking for a way in. What made breaking into the compound especially difficult was that it was surrounded by a lot of land and ringed by tall electric fences. It was clear that the Elgen had built a large buffer around the facility to prevent unwanted guests.

When a week had passed, I began to worry again about the voice, particularly because of all the information we had handed over. Could the man we had interrogated somehow have tricked Taylor? They knew about her powers; maybe they had been prepared to deceive us. Maybe they had technology we didn't know about. Eight days from the man's visit, my phone finally rang.

"I understand you gave my man some grief," the voice said.

"We were being careful," I said.

"Good," he said. "You should be. You leave for Peru tomorrow morning at six. Drive to the same place you picked up the Hummers. Do you remember the place?"

"Yes."

"There will be two black Ford Excursions waiting for you. They will drive you to the airport. What did Grace decide?"

"She's decided to stay behind with you. Keep her safe."

"We will."

"Okay," I said. "I'll let everybody know. Anything we need to take with us?"

There was a short pause. "Courage," he said. "Lots of courage."

* * *

I gathered everyone together to tell them about the call. Afterward, Ostin took a moment and briefed us on what he'd learned about the compound. Things got quiet fast. For the first time, the reality of what we were attempting set in.

I asked if anyone had questions, and no one did—at least none they wanted to share. I had no doubt there would be plenty to come—

more than I had answers for. At the end of the briefing I said, "If you've changed your mind, it's not too late to back out."

"We're not backing out," Jack said. "*Semper Fi.*"

"What does that mean?" Taylor asked.

"Always faithful," Ostin said. "It's the Marine Corps motto."

"We're all in," Ian said. Everyone else nodded their heads in agreement.

"Thanks, guys. Get some sleep. We've got a long day tomorrow."

As everyone got ready for bed, I slipped out alone by the pool, settling into one of the vinyl lounge chairs. The pool area was dark, lit only by the solar lights in the corner of the yard and the blue, shimmering luminescence of the pool's light. The only sound was a symphony of crickets.

I needed to get away and think. Or maybe to *not* think. I had too many thoughts to effectively corral and too many fears to accompany them. I had been gulping all day, and I took a few deep breaths to calm myself.

I cupped my hands together, like I was making a snowball, and pulsed. To my surprise a ball of electricity formed, almost like a soap bubble, except with more weight, like a Ping-Pong ball. Out of curiosity, I tossed it away from me. It hit the ground and popped loudly with a crisp electric snap.

I made another and threw it into the pool. It exploded in the water, lighting the entire pool. "That is so cool," I said.

I made another and threw it across the pool. I hadn't noticed there was a cat on the other side, and although the bubble didn't hit it, the cat screeched and ran off.

The glass door slid open and Ostin walked out. "There you are," he said. "I was wondering where you went."

"Come here," I said. "I want to show you something."

I pulsed as I had before, and a glowing orb about the size of a golf ball rose from my hand. I threw it into the pool. This time the pop was as loud as a firecracker. I thought Ostin's jaw was going to fall off.

"Pretty cool, isn't it?"

"Do you know what that is?" he said.

"A ball of lightning," I said.

“That’s exactly what it is! Scientists have been arguing for centuries about whether or not ball lightning exists. You just solved a centuries-old debate. Do it again.”

I was about to make another when Taylor walked out of the house. “Michael?”

“I’m over here,” I said.

She walked over to my side. “I was wondering where you’d gone. What are you guys doing?”

“You gotta see this,” Ostin said.

Taylor sat down in the lounge chair next to me. “See what?”

“Do it, Michael.”

I pulsed, forming another ball. This one was larger than my first, about the size of a baseball.

Taylor leaned forward to look at it. “It’s kind of beautiful. Can I touch it?”

“It will definitely shock you,” Ostin said. “It’s lightning. Just in a different package.”

Taylor pulled back.

“Watch this,” I said. I threw it at the pool. It came off my hand like a softball and exploded in the water, briefly illuminating the entire surface.

“That’s so cool,” Taylor said.

“I wonder how I could measure the amps of one of those,” Ostin said, settling into the lounge chair to my left.

I made a few more while Taylor and Ostin watched.

Taylor said to Ostin, “Hey, Tex. Would you mind going inside for a moment? I need to talk to Michael.”

“You can talk to him,” he said.

“Alone,” she said.

He looked at her, then me. “Okay,” he said. He stood up. “For how long?”

“I don’t know,” Taylor said. “Until we’re done.”

He walked inside, sliding the glass door shut behind him. I looked at Taylor. Her eyes were soft.

“You okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s you I’m worried about. How are *you* doing?”

"I'm fine," I said. "Why? Was I ticking a lot?"

"Some," she said. "How can you be just fine? Your mother's gone, the Elgen are hunting us, we're about to fly to a strange country, and everyone's depending on you for answers. I don't know how you handle all the pressure. I know I couldn't do it."

I exhaled. "I don't know. What else am I going to do?" Suddenly my eyes began to tear up. I looked away so she wouldn't see.

Taylor got up and pushed her chair next to mine. "Come here," she said.

I looked back at her and she smiled. "Come closer," she said.

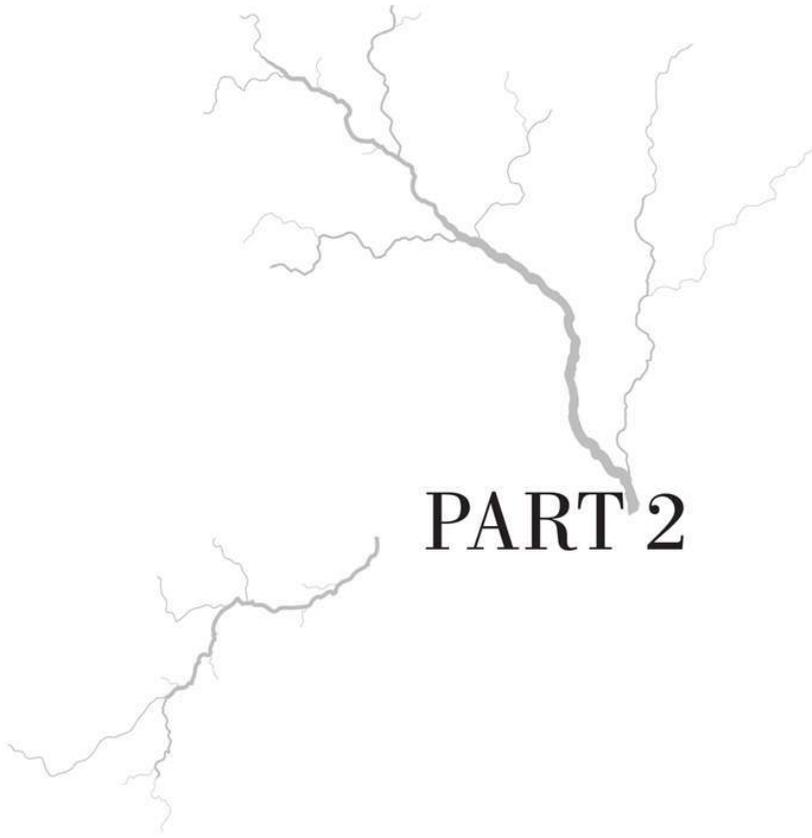
I leaned in to her and she put her arms around me. She put her chin against my forehead and gently stroked the back of my head. It felt so good.

"You don't have to be strong all the time," she said. "Even heroes need to be taken care of."

"I'm not a hero," I said. "I'm a fifteen-year-old who has no idea what he's doing."

She was quiet for a moment, then she kissed the top of my head and said, "You're *my* hero."

I didn't know what to say. Maybe there wasn't anything to be said. I just closed my eyes and felt her warm face against mine and, for the first time in weeks, felt peace.



PART 2



“I hate boats,” Hatch said, wiping his forehead with a gold-monogrammed handkerchief. The boat he was *hating* was a superyacht with all the luxuries befitting a \$450 million vessel: a helipad, two current-jetted swimming pools, and an art gallery that included two van Goghs, three Escher lithographs, and a Rembrandt (the chairman had a penchant for Dutch artists). There were luxury suites for eighteen and an exclusive dining room with crystal chandeliers and scarlet wool carpet interwoven with twenty-four-karat gold thread. The yacht also featured some less luxuriant but interesting add-ons, including radar, sonar, and surface-to-air missiles.

Hatch was prone to seasickness, and although he understood the necessity of moving the Elgen corporate headquarters to international waters, he would have preferred the ship to remain docked in some obscure bay off the coast of Africa or the Philippines. The two electric teens seated next to him in the waiting room looked at him sympathetically.

“Would you like me to help?” Tara said, tapping her temple. “I could make you feel better.”

Hatch shook his head. “No. I’ve got to keep my wits about me. I’m sensing trouble.”

Tara had traveled with Hatch and the rest of the kids from Pasadena to Rome, where they left the others behind, helicoptering to the Elgen's yacht a hundred miles north of Sicily—in the Tyrrhenian Sea. The other teen, Torstyn, had joined them in Rome. Torstyn had spent the last nineteen months on assignment in Peru and, at Hatch's command, had flown directly to Italy.

Tara knew Torstyn—all the Elgen teens were familiar with one another—but she hadn't seen him in a long time and he had changed. His skin was darker from the South American sun, and his hair was long and wild. His personality had changed as well. Something about him frightened her.

"How long will we be here?" Torstyn asked, his hand extended toward the hundred-gallon saltwater aquarium built into the wall in front of them.

"Only as long as we need to be," Hatch said.

"Stop it!" Tara said.

"Stop *what*?" Torstyn asked, grinning.

"You know *what*. You killed the fish."

Torstyn had boiled the water in the aquarium from fifteen feet away. Two exotic angelfish were now floating on top of the water.

"They're just fish," Torstyn said. "Same thing you ate last night."

"Actually," Hatch said. "They were rare peppermint angelfish, found only in the waters of Rarotonga, in the South Pacific. I gave them to the chairman as a gift last year. They run about twenty-five thousand dollars apiece."

Torstyn frowned. "Sorry, sir."

"Ask next time."

"Yes, sir."

Hatch looked at him coolly, then asked, "How long did it take you?"

"About forty seconds."

"Good. I want you to get it down to twenty."

"Yes, sir."

"Then ten."

"Yes, sir."

Hatch nodded. "At ten you'll be unstoppable."

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Hatch went back to his e-reader. He'd been reading a book on mind control written in the late fifties by William Sargant, a British psychiatrist. He had already read the book several times. He was fascinated with the subject and had studied all aspects of mind control from hypnosis to suicide cults.

A slender, well-dressed woman in her midthirties walked into the waiting room. “Excuse me, Dr. Hatch?”

Hatch looked up.

“The board is ready to see you now.”

Hatch stood, tossing his reader on the sofa cushion next to Tara. “I'll be right back,” he said.

“Do you want us to come with you?” Torstyn asked.

“No, you're not invited.” He walked to the conference room door, then turned back. “But stay alert.”

“Yes, sir,” they said, almost in unison.

Hatch straightened his tie, then walked into the conference room. An Elgen guard stood on each side of the door. Neither of them saluted him. The guards on the boat were the only ones in the company who never saluted Hatch. He walked past them into the room.

The boardroom was bright and the walls were covered with stainless steel tiles. Recessed directional lighting illuminated the art on the wall—large, black pictures with red, abstract silhouettes, images that looked more like inkblot tests than art. The shape of the room was trapezoidal; one entered in at the smaller end and broadening out in the rear. The outer wall, to Hatch's right, was made of thick, protective glass, forming an eight-foot-tall window looking out over the crested waves sixty feet below.

The table in the middle of the room was twenty-seven feet long and made of rare Brazilian rosewood, with brushed stainless steel trim around the edge. The table was surrounded by twelve high-backed chairs upholstered in black Italian leather and spaced every few feet. All of the chairs were filled except for two, one next to the chairman and one at the opposite end of the table, which was usually reserved for visitors.

The board was split evenly between men and women—all over fifty, a few gray with years. Anonymity was essential to the Elgen, and board members used numbers instead of names, the numbers corresponding to their term of service and place at the table. The chairman, Giacomo Schema, was Number One and the only member of the board who used his name.

Every eye was on Hatch as he entered the room. Although he had, at one time, served as CEO of Elgen Inc., the company had been reorganized after the original MEI machine was discovered to be dangerous. Hatch had been removed from the board, but had served ever since as the executive director, overseeing the daily affairs of the company. His relationship with the board had been volatile, and more than once there had been motions to remove him as director. But the company's growing profitability and status had, at least to that moment, ensured his longevity.

"Chairman Schema, board members," Hatch said, slightly nodding.

"Welcome, Dr. Hatch," the chairman said. "I trust your flight wasn't overly taxing." Chairman Schema was a broad, barrel-chested Italian who dressed impeccably in Armani suits with silk ascots.

"No, thank you. I'm used to the flight."

"Take a seat, please," Schema said, motioning to the chair at the opposite end of the table.

"Thank you." Hatch pulled the chair out and sat down.

"Tell us about the disaster in Pasadena," Schema said, no longer concealing his anger.

"As I wrote in my report, one of the electric children—"

"Michael Vey," Six, one of the board members to his left, said.

Hatch looked at her. "Yes," he confirmed. "Vey managed to overpower one of our youths, the one you know as Zeus, and recruited him to help him free the others."

"How did he accomplish this? Was Vey left unguarded?"

"On the contrary. He was actually strapped down and being watched by three guards and Zeus. We believe that Vey may have telepathic powers we were unaware of—powers like Tara's or her sister, Taylor. Shall I continue?"

Chairman Schema waved his hand in an angry flourish. “By all means.”

“The surveillance cameras in the room were blown out, so we’ve had to deduce much of what transpired. From what we’ve gathered, after Vey overpowered Zeus, he freed two of his accomplices who were locked down and the four of them attacked the guards in the hallway outside. They then released three more of the children who had been kept in seclusion—Ian, Abigail, and McKenna. Together, the seven of them attacked the academy and freed the GPs. The GPs managed to arm themselves, and for the protection of the rest of the children, we were forced to flee.”

“What is the status of the freed GPs now?”

“The GPs are all accounted for except three. Two of them are with Vey, the other one, we believe, committed suicide in an aqueduct. His RFID tags are no longer registering. We are awaiting a report on the body.”

“What about the children?” Three asked.

“We lost seven. . . .”

There was an audible groan from both sides of the table.

Hatch looked around, then said in a softer voice, “We lost seven. Vey; Zeus; Tara’s twin, Taylor; and the three from Cell Block H—Ian, Abigail, and McKenna.”

“Please, remind us of their gifts,” Four said.

“Ian sees through electrolocation. . . .”

“Which means?” Chairman Schema asked.

“He can see through solid objects that humans cannot. McKenna can generate heat and light. Abigail can eliminate pain by stimulating nerve endings.”

“I could use her for my headache right now,” Eight said wryly.

Hatch ignored the comment. “Then, as I mentioned, Zeus, who can throw electricity.”

“That’s only six,” Chairman Schema said.

“We also lost Grace.”

“They captured her?”

Hatch interlaced his fingers in front of him. “Yes, we think so.”

“What is it that Grace does?”

“She can hack into data systems and store information like a hard drive.”

Six asked, “Did she hack into our system? Does she have confidential information that could compromise our security?”

“She was never given access to our mainframe.”

“Were the children still in the building when you fled?” Three asked.

“Yes. They were.”

“Then may we presume that she had access to the mainframe after you left?”

“The mainframe was set on self-destruct, so all the information was destroyed. But there was a short window of opportunity, so it is possible she downloaded *some* information, but even that is highly unlikely. Especially if she was taken against her will.”

“What makes you think she was taken against her will?” Six asked.

“As we gathered up the other youths, we were not able to locate her. We believe she was on one of the other floors when the attack occurred.”

Eight shook his head in disgust. “What a nightmare.”

Chairman Schema leaned forward, pressing his fingertips together. “You had reported to me . . . actually, you had *promised* me, that the children would be back in your custody two days ago. But they are not.”

“No. Vey and his associates have eluded two of our traps.”

“Two?”

“They were tipped off to the first one. They attacked and tied up our watch, then fled the scene. We tracked them down to a home where they were hiding, and they were all captured. But they managed to overpower the guards and escape.”

“This seems to be part of a pattern, Dr. Hatch,” Chairman Schema said angrily. “I am beginning to doubt your ability to capture Vey and his friends.”

“These are very powerful youths. The combination of their unique powers makes apprehending them, as Eight so aptly put it, a nightmare. Especially since our objective is to bring them in alive.”

“What provoked Vey’s attack in the first place?” Three asked.

“Vey was looking for his mother. We captured and held him for more than three weeks before he attempted his escape.”

Three leaned forward. “And did he find his mother?”

“No. She wasn’t being held in Pasadena. She’s currently detained in our compound in Peru.”

“So now we are holding hostages too?” Eight said.

Hatch replied, “She’s the bait we need to recapture her son.”

Chairman Schema slammed his hand on the table. “Dr. Hatch, your missteps continue to compromise this organization. First you were abducting children, now you are abducting their parents. These are crimes for which the board may be held accountable.”

“Which is why we reside in international waters,” Hatch said. “Mr. Chairman, may I remind the board that we were all complicit in much greater crimes with the death of forty-two infants. It was our cover-up of that incident that revealed the phenomenon of the electric children in the first place.”

“Strike that from the record,” Chairman Schema said to the board member taking notes. “Yes, we are aware of our complicity in that matter. And every time you pursue additional lawlessness, you further endanger this board. Are you mindful of this?”

“I do not take any of our actions lightly, Mr. Chairman. What has been done is part of our ongoing Neo-Species Genesis program, a program that has been unanimously approved by the board, not once but repeatedly, over the past decade.”

“Which is precisely what we wish to discuss this morning,” Chairman Schema said. “Dr. Hatch, in the last decade you have spent two hundred and forty-six million dollars in the Neo-Species program. Other than the ‘accidental’ creation of the original seventeen children, have you successfully replicated an electric human?”

“No, sir. But we believe we’re close.”

“What evidence would you have to support what seems to me a rather optimistic assessment?”

“As you’re well aware, we’ve now successfully altered the electric composition of other mammals, and we are about to begin testing on primates. Also, there have been many other worthwhile discoveries and advancements that have come as a result of the program. The

Starxource initiative wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the Neo-Species program—surely that alone warrants its continuation.”

“Dr. Hatch is right,” Four said. “The Starxource program is of inestimable value.”

“Thank you,” Hatch said. “And we don't know what other beneficial advancements the program will generate in the future.”

Board member Two spoke up for the first time. “I am the first to commend you for your success with the Starxource program, Doctor. Our power plants have been even more successful than we envisioned or hoped for. My question is, now that we have found a commercially viable use for the technology, why should we continue pursuing an end, which, after more than a decade, appears to be a dead one?”

“I would second that argument,” Nine said. “Even if we are successful in achieving your Neo-Species goals, I see no commercial application.”

“Commercial application?” Hatch blurted out. “We're talking about creating a new species of human beings. We are altering the very course of human history.”

“Exactly,” Nine said. “And how do you propose we monetize that? These are people, not machines. If we create an electric person, they are free to do whatever they want with that power. What is to keep them from sharing their gifts with the highest bidder?” Nine turned to the chairman. “It is not our objective to create history, it is our mission and corporate objective to create profits. If the doctor's goal is a worthy one, and I have no doubt that he intends it as such, I suggest he create a charitable organization to pursue these ends—but separate it from the corporate body.”

Hatch didn't answer, though some of them noticed his hands trembling with anger.

“At any rate,” Two said, “whatever good may come from electrifying people, it certainly will not generate more profits than the already proven Starxource initiative. We have a very real opportunity to become a force of global power, larger than OPEC or any of the oil-producing countries of the world.”

This started a discussion among the board members. Chairman Schema raised his hands for silence. When the room was quiet he

turned his attention to Hatch. “Dr. Hatch, you should be aware that this discussion on the continuance of the Neo-Species program is more than a hypothetical one. Several months ago a motion was brought before the board to shut down the program entirely. At that time we tabled the motion until you could join us in person and be given the opportunity to defend your work.”

Hatch turned red. “Shut down the program? That would be ludicrous. The power of this corporation exists because of this program.”

“That is incorrect,” Twelve said, speaking out for the first time. “The MEI was developed prior to the Neo-Species program. Unfortunately it is still too dangerous to use. The only part of the machine we can duplicate is the part that kills people. I agree with the commercial assessment proffered by Nine. I believe we should focus our efforts on the propagation of the Starxource initiative, to the exclusion of all else. Future discoveries will still come, just from the Starxource labs.”

“I have a question,” Three said, looking over a document. “Please explain this twenty-seven-million-dollar price tag for our facility in Peru. It’s nearly double the cost of our other plants.”

“We added a new guard training facility as well,” Hatch answered.

“What are we training them to do? Fly?”

Several members chuckled. Hatch looked at Three, concealing his fierce anger behind a controlled demeanor. She had been against him from the beginning.

“Elgen security is of utmost importance,” Hatch said. “Just one leak of our information or the theft of one pair of breeding rats could endanger our entire operation. Security is no place to count pennies.”

“Twenty-seven million dollars is hardly pennies,” she retorted.

“Dr. Hatch has a valid point,” Chairman Schema said. “But why Peru?”

“Peru gives us a certain latitude to train in privacy and in the manner we consider best practice.”

“Very well,” the chairman said. “Is there anything else you would like to say, Dr. Hatch, before we vote on the future of the program?”

Hatch glanced around the room. “What you are considering . . . to shut down the Neo-Species Genesis program is to turn our backs on the future.”

“Wait, wait,” Three said. “What future are you speaking to? Certainly not the Starxource program. The future could not be brighter.” She turned to the other board members. “I sound like the slogan, don’t I?”

“Please,” Hatch said. “Just give me another year. We are on the verge of a breakthrough. With the finding of Vey and the twin, Taylor, we expect critical advancement.”

“But you don’t have Vey or Taylor,” Three said.

“We will soon. I promise you, you won’t be disappointed.” Hatch turned to Chairman Schema. “Just give me twelve more months.”

“We’ve been hearing a lot of promises but seeing few results,” Three said. “You ask for another year, I would maintain that we’ve given you five years too many. At least.”

“Mr. Chairman,” Four said, “I move that we suspend discussion for a vote.”

“Do I have a second?” Chairman Schema asked.

Three hands went up.

“Very well. Doctor, if you would please leave the room while we conduct a vote.”

Hatch slowly stood, looking over the board members. “Shutting down the Neo-Species Genesis program would be a huge mistake, one I believe you will live to regret.”

“Noted,” Chairman Schema said. “If you would please wait in the reception area, we will momentarily notify you of our decision.”

Hatch walked outside the room, shutting the door behind him. Tara and Torstyn watched him enter. They could see from his expression how angry he was. Torstyn started to speak, “What’s—?”

Hatch held up his hand to silence him. “They are voting on our future.” He sat down on the couch. Nothing was said. Less than a minute later the door opened.

“Dr. Hatch, you may come in now.”

Hatch returned to the conference room. Few of the board members were looking at him, and from the sympathetic expression

of those who were, he knew how the vote had gone.

“The vote was not unanimous,” Chairman Schema said. “But there was a majority vote in the affirmative to dissolve the Neo-Species Genesis program. To avoid further expenditures we are asking you to fly immediately to Peru, where you will relieve the scientists who are involved with the program.”

“But . . .”

Chairman Schema raised his hand. “You will relieve these scientists of their current duties. Obviously we cannot just release them back into society, so they will be assimilated into the Starxource program. Their expertise led to the creation of this program, so we expect that their talents will be put to good use in maintaining and improving the program. At our current rate of growth and demand we will certainly need their specialized knowledge.

“The GPs, of course, are no longer of use to us. For obvious reasons, we can’t just release them, as that would cause serious problems and inquiries into our activities. We trust that you will find a creative *solution* to this problem. We don’t want to know about it.”

“What about the electric children?” Hatch asked.

“It is also the decision of the board that the electric children should be reintegrated into normal society. An endowment will be established for each one allowing them to pursue further educational or vocational opportunities.

“As for Vey, you will reunite the boy with his mother with sufficient monetary remuneration to guarantee that there will be no lawsuits filed. We expect you to work with Legal to ensure that this delicate situation is handled discreetly.”

Hatch was speechless.

“This is not a censure, Doctor, this is simply a change in course. We appreciate your devotion and the success that your efforts have brought to our company.”

Hatch clenched his hands behind his back, his jaw tightening. “Do you have a time frame for this action?”

“We desire an immediate shutdown. We expect you to be in Peru within two days to begin the process. We realize that your relationship with the children is as personal as it is professional, so

your timeline for that transition is up to you and the children to decide; however we expect that all business related to this matter be finalized before the end of this calendar year. We ask to be kept informed in all aspects of the transition. We thank you in advance for your expeditious handling of this matter, and we trust that it will be more successful than the shutdown of the Pasadena facility.”

Hatch looked around the room, veiling his contempt for most of the gathered body. “Yes, sir. I’ll see to it immediately.” He turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

Tara and Torstyn stood as he entered. “Come on,” he said. “We’re leaving.”

Walking to the helipad, Torstyn asked, “Where are we going?”

“To Rome to gather the others. Then we’re headed back to Peru.”

Within minutes the three of them were hovering over the Tyrrhenian Sea on the flight back to Rome.

“What did they say, sir?”

“They want to dismantle the NSG program.”

The kids looked at each other.

“What?” Torstyn asked. “How come?”

“What about us?” Tara asked.

“I’ll tell you on the plane,” Hatch said. He glanced down at his satellite phone. “No! No! No!” he shouted. He pressed a button on his phone. “Get me Dr. Jung immediately.”

“What is it?” Tara asked.

Hatch looked at her with a dark expression. “Tanner just tried to kill himself.”



The Elgen helicopter landed around 7:00 p.m. atop the six-story Elgen building just outside of Rome. Bright orange lights flashed at the corners of the structure, silhouetting the waiting guards dressed in the Elgen black uniform.

“Welcome back, sir,” one of the guards shouted over the sound of the helicopter’s rotors.

Hatch shouted to Tara and Torstyn, “Get something to eat, then gather up the rest of the family in the conference room by eight.” He turned to the guard. “Where is Tanner?”

“He’s in restraints in the basement detaining cell, sir.”

“Where is Dr. Jung?”

“He’s in the basement with him, observing, sir.”

“Come with me.”

They took an elevator from the roof. Tara and Torstyn got off on the second floor while Hatch and the guards went all the way down to the basement level.

The marble-tiled corridor was dimly lit and the only sound was the echo of their footsteps as they walked. The observation room and detaining cells were at the end of the hallway. One of the guards opened the door, and Hatch stepped in.

Dr. Jung, the resident psychiatrist, was sitting in a chair facing a two-way mirror that looked into the adjacent room. He stood as Hatch entered.

“Dr. Hatch, I was just—”

Hatch raised his hand, silencing the psychiatrist. He leaned forward toward the glass to better comprehend what he was seeing in the next room.

Tanner, one of the seventeen electric children, was cuffed and curled up in bed in the fetal position, softly whimpering. His long, red hair was tangled up around his face.

Hatch studied him for a moment, then turned back toward the doctor.

“You incompetent worm. I told you to fix him. Do those letters before your name even mean anything?”

The psychiatrist was red in the face. “I’m doing my best.”

“And your *best* is in restraints curled up in the corner of his room.”

“He’s not a machine, sir. He’s a boy. You can’t just go in and change out a few parts and make him better.”

“But I can change out a few doctors,” Hatch said.

The psychiatrist took the threat seriously. He’d heard rumors about what happened to those dispatched from the Elgen service. Most became GPs. Some of them just disappeared. He began stuttering, “W-w-what do you want me to do?”

“Why are you asking me? You’re the shrink. Give him a pill. Give him a hundred pills, just fix him.”

“He has a conscience. If you killed a thousand people, you’d have trouble sleeping at night too.”

Hatch leaned in toward him, his eyes narrowing. “I *never* have trouble sleeping, Doctor. And if you ever insinuate anything like that again, I’ll see to it that you never have trouble sleeping either.”

The doctor swallowed. “I didn’t mean to imply . . . Tanner’s just really stressed right now. He’s been worked too hard. Children need downtime. We need to let him spend some time with the other teenagers. And his parents.”

“His parents?” Hatch said softly. “You think he should see his parents?”

The doctor looked terrified. "He said he misses them."

"Of course he *misses* them, you idiot. That's why he's been taken from them. So you think he should spend a little quality time with them? And what if he tells his parents what he's been doing, and they tell him they would rather die than have him drop another plane from the sky? Add that to your list of mental problems." Hatch walked across the room. "You're on probation, Doctor. Don't disappoint me again."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'll figure him out."

"You better. I'm taking both of you with me to Peru. I expect the boy to be heavily sedated. Heavily. I don't want to be along for the ride when he decides to take his life again. We leave first thing in the morning, oh five hundred hours."

"Yes, sir."

Hatch looked back at Tanner for a moment, then turned and walked out of the room. On the way to the elevator Hatch's phone rang.

"Dr. Hatch, Captain Welch is on the line."

"Put him through." Hatch paused in the hallway. "Did you capture Vey?"

"No. We lost him."

"How do you lose a tracking device?"

"He must have discovered the RFID tracers in the GPs and disabled them."

Hatch's anger reached a new high. "Find them now!"

"Yes, sir. We'll find them, sir."

Hatch threw his phone across the hall. "Vey!"

The guard retrieved his phone and held open the elevator door. "Your phone, sir."

Hatch took it from him. "Fifth floor."



Quentin, Tara, Kylee, and Bryan were sitting in the Elgen dining room waiting for Hatch to arrive. Torstyn was on the opposite side of the room, looking through a stack of *Soldier of Fortune* magazines.

“What’s Torstyn’s power?” Bryan whispered.

The kids rarely talked about one another’s powers, and Torstyn had been separated from them for so long that some of them had forgotten what he could do.

“He’s like a human microwave oven,” Tara said.

“That could come in handy,” Bryan said.

“Yeah,” Quentin said dryly. “Around lunchtime.”

Torstyn suddenly looked up from the magazine he was browsing, and Bryan quickly turned away. Torstyn stood up and walked over to the group. “Hey, Tara,” he said. “Do that thing again.”

“What thing?”

“You know, what you did on the helicopter with your powers.”

Quentin looked at Tara, and she blushed. “I don’t know. . . .”

“Oh, come on. You said you needed to practice.”

Quentin’s eyes narrowed. “Whatever it is, she doesn’t want to do it. So leave her alone.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, pretty boy. Mind your own business.”

“I’m the student body president of the academy, so Tara is my business.”

Torstyn grinned. “That is pathetic. Never before has so little power gone to somebody’s head. And in case you didn’t get the memo, school’s out, loser.”

Quentin turned red in the face. “Don’t push your luck, Tor-Stain.”

Torstyn pushed his face into Quentin’s. “Do you think I’m afraid of you? While you’ve spent the last year and a half lounging around California in designer jeans and polo shirts, drinking girlie drinks with little umbrellas in them, you know what I’ve been doing for fun? I hunt anacondas alone in the jungles. No gun. No machete. Just me.” He rolled up his sleeve to show a ragged scar across his biceps leading to two large puncture wounds.

All the kids stared, and Torstyn was pleased by their response. “Last January, during the rainy season, I was wading through a patch of jungle when a thirty-foot anaconda shot out of the water and grabbed me by the arm. It tried to drag me into the river.”

“No way, dude,” Bryan said.

Torstyn smiled. “As it was wrapping its coils around me, I looked it in the eyes and cooked it. Its brain exploded out its ears.”

“Whoa!” Bryan said. “Awesome!”

“I had some of the servants drag the snake back to the compound, and I had boots made out of its skin. The thing was a monster. I could have made a dozen pairs.” Torstyn looked at Quentin and sneered. “I’m guessing the scariest thing you’ve faced in the last year was too much starch in your shorts, pretty boy.”

Quentin didn’t back down. “You want to see how much you scare me, Tarzan?” Quentin said. The air around him began to crackle with electricity.

“Don’t start what you don’t want me to finish, tough guy,” Torstyn said.

“C’mon, guys,” Tara said. “This isn’t cool. Someone could get hurt.”

“Shut up,” Bryan said. “I want to see them fight. Battle of the Titans.”

“There better not be a fight,” Hatch said sternly, walking into the room. “Stand down. Both of you.” He looked at Torstyn. “You weren’t thinking of using your powers on another family member?”

Torstyn fidgeted. “Uh, no, sir.”

“And you, Quentin?”

“No, sir. I was protecting Tara’s honor, sir.”

“That sounds noble,” Hatch said facetiously. “You were going to protect her ‘honor’ with your powers?”

He swallowed. “It hadn’t come to that, sir.”

“You both should be glad for that. Remember my rules, gentlemen. Then remember the penalty for breaking my rules.”

“Yes, sir,” they both said.

“Now listen up. We are flying out first thing in the morning. So pack up tonight. We’ll be gone awhile and where we’re going there are no shopping malls and no concierge desk. You’re going to be roughing it. So bring extra necessities. Especially you young ladies.”

“How long will we be gone?” Kylee asked.

“More than a month. Possibly as long as a year.”

“A year?” Tara said.

Quentin raised his hand. Torstyn rolled his eyes.

“May I ask where we’re going, sir?” Quentin asked.

“No, you may not. I will fill everyone in on the details during the flight. Now go to bed. We have a long day tomorrow, and I need you all to be sharp. Everyone’s excused except for Torstyn and Quentin. You two stay.”

“Yes, sir,” Quentin said.

Torstyn breathed out heavily. “All right.”

When everyone had left Hatch looked at the two young men. Quentin’s head was slightly bowed; Torstyn was slumped down in his chair.

“Sit up,” Hatch said to Torstyn.

“Yes, sir,” he said, straightening himself up. “Sorry, sir.”

“You thought you were going to fight? What were you thinking? This isn’t a schoolyard playground. With your powers, any fight is to the death. Or have you grown stupid in the last two days? Who gave you permission to kill each other?”

They sat quietly, avoiding Hatch's fierce gaze.

"I asked you a question!" Hatch shouted. "Who told you that you could risk your life without my permission?"

"No one, sir," Quentin said.

Torstyn shook his head. "No one, sir."

Hatch leaned forward. "Let me make myself perfectly clear. I don't care what you think of each other. But if either of you lets your ego get in the way of what's about to happen, you'll spend the rest of your life guarding a Starxource plant in Outer Mongolia. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

"There will be order and strict obedience. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," they repeated.

"Good. Quentin has been in charge of the group for the last five years in Pasadena and has done an adequate job of keeping the Elgen youths in line. I see no reason to change that. Quentin will remain my number one."

Quentin crossed his arms triumphantly over his chest, giving Torstyn a satisfied look. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't get smug, Quentin. You're number one over the rest of the youths, but not Torstyn. Torstyn answers only to me."

"Thank you, sir," Torstyn said, glaring at Quentin.

"Where we're headed is no Beverly Hills vacation, and none of you, except Torstyn, are ready for what you're going to encounter. Torstyn knows what it takes to survive in a hostile environment, don't you, Torstyn?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now hear me and hear me well. Whatever you do, you will not get romantically involved with any members of the family. We do not need any complications right now—a house divided against itself cannot stand. Do you both understand?"

"Yes, sir," they said again.

"What we are facing will test everyone. We've lost half the youths already, and now Tanner is on the verge of cracking. In fact, he already has. I need both of you one hundred percent. Now shake hands."

Quentin reached out his hand. "My apologies."

Torstyn gripped his hand. “Okay,” he said. “Me too.”

“Good,” Hatch said. “I’m not surprised that you’re at odds. You’re both alpha males and you’re both warriors—which is exactly what I need right now. Warriors.” He leaned forward. “Gentlemen, the pieces are in place and we’re about to make the first move. The war has begun. But first we must cleanse the inner vessel.”



The sun was just starting to rise in Rome as Dr. Hatch and the electric children drove in a small convoy of Mercedes-Benz vans to the Leonardo da Vinci–Fiumicino airport to board the Elgen’s private jet. Only Tanner traveled alone, strapped to a gurney and heavily sedated. He was attended by his doctor and one guard.

Hatch was in the lead car with three guards and the driver. He was wearing his dark, custom glasses and wrote in a notebook the entire ride, speaking only when they reached their destination.

He didn’t talk to the youths at all, except to hurry them onto the plane. They each took their own row of seats except for Tara and Kylee, who sat next to each other. Tanner and Dr. Jung were behind the others, near the back of the aircraft. Tanner’s gurney was fastened to the wall next to Dr. Jung’s seat and a screen was drawn around them. After the jet’s cabin door was closed, Hatch disappeared into his private quarters, in the back of the plane.

The flight attendant distributed a breakfast parfait to the passengers, then offered a full hot breakfast, which only Torstyn took. Bryan and both of the girls fell asleep as soon as they were airborne.

About two hours after the jet had left the ground, Hatch came out of his quarters and walked to the front of the main cabin. He grabbed

a microphone from the wall and spoke. “All right, everyone. Give me your attention.”

He waited as the kids stirred. Quentin woke Tara and Kylee. “Dr. Hatch is speaking.”

“Is everyone listening?” Hatch asked.

“Yes, sir,” Quentin said.

“Show me the Elgen salute.”

Everyone made the sign, touching the three middle fingers of their left hands to their temples, their thumb and little finger touching.

“Listen carefully. What I’m about to tell you is C10.”

“Whoa,” Bryan said. He glanced over at Quentin, who raised his eyebrows.

Hatch labeled messages to the teens in levels of confidentiality—the more important the message, the higher the level. C10 was the highest. Even Quentin had only heard a C10 once before. The consequence of divulging information was proportionate to the level of confidentiality. Revealing a C10 message to outsiders would carry the highest punishment—death by torture.

“We are flying to Peru because I have been ordered by the Elgen board to shut down and dismantle the Neo-Species Genesis program—the very program that brought you to me in the first place, the program that you and I have spent our *lives* on for the last twelve years. I have been instructed to reallocate the scientists to different Starxource operations, quietly exterminate the GPs, and then send you all off to lead your own lives as private, normal citizens of whatever country and school you choose, never to hear from us again.” Hatch leaned back, waiting for the teens to react.

“What?” Quentin said, clearly stunned.

“They can’t do that!” Tara said.

Kylee started crying.

After a moment Bryan said, “Does this mean no more family trips?”

“No more family trips,” Hatch said calmly. “No more *family*. You’re on your own.”

Hatch stoically watched them as the reality settled in, his own emotions concealed behind his glasses. The teens were clearly upset,

glancing back and forth at one another in disbelief, hoping that Dr. Hatch was playing some kind of a horrible prank.

Finally Hatch said, "So tell me, what do you have to say to that?"

Quentin was the first to speak. "With all due respect, sir. I think I can speak for all of us and say we don't like it. We want to stay with you."

Hatch glanced up and down the rows. "Is that true? Kylee?"

Kylee wiped her eyes. "Yes, sir. I don't want to be an orphan."

"Tara?"

"Me too, sir."

"Bryan?"

"I think it's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"Torstyn?"

"Sucks."

Hatch nodded a little. "Then I take it you disapprove, Torstyn?"

"Yes, sir. I disapprove."

Hatch paused for a moment. "Then the real question is, perhaps, what exactly would you be willing to do to keep the family together?"

"Whatever you tell us to do, sir," Quentin said. "Right, everyone?" He was answered with a chorus of affirmations.

Hatch studied their expressions for a moment, then nodded approvingly. "Exactly what I thought you would say. Now let me remind you that what I am going to tell you, every word of it, is C10. What is the punishment for disclosing a C10 secret? Tara."

"The punishment for disclosing a C10 secret is death by torture."

"That is correct," Hatch said. "If you understand, show me the salute."

They all put their fingers to their temples again.

Hatch looked down for a moment, then removed his glasses, carefully folding them and sliding them into his jacket's inner pocket. "I'm pleased to hear that you don't like the board's plans, because I have no intention of following them.

"Imagine, letting you go. You beautiful, powerful youths. Cast out as pearls among the swine of humanity. You, my eagles, are not to spend your lives pecking among the chickens. The chickens are for your amusement only.

“The board will not decide our fate. *We*, not them, are in charge. *We*, not them, carry the burden of history. Their rejection is not a surprise to me. I knew that the day would come when we would reach this impasse. Why? Because we have different motivations. Their motivation is profit. But our motivation, our cause, is nothing less than a new world.

“Those idiots on the board want to put a new coat of paint on the house. I say burn the house to the ground and rebuild it! No government but *our* government. No religion but *our* religion. No gods but *our* gods. We will tear down the human foundation brick by brick and construct our own.

“These chickens have lost their way. And we are going to lead them into a bright, new coop.” His eyes carefully studied the excited expressions of the youths. He spoke his next words very slowly and deliberately. “Are you with me?”

The youths cheered.

“The war has begun, my eagles. First the Elgen corporation, then the world. I have been preparing. We are going to Peru, not to shut down the compound, but to consolidate our power. Peru will be our headquarters for mounting our overthrow of the misguided corporation. You will be my war council, my generals, and my personal guard. Make no mistake, the stakes are high. If we lose, you are on your own, no money, no privilege, just a life of quiet desperation pecking out an existence with the rest of the chickens.”

Hatch looked around the cabin, judging the effect of his words by the terrified and indignant looks on their faces.

“But we are not going to lose. That is not your destiny. That is not my destiny. And the Elgen are just the first speed bump on our journey. After we have conquered them, we shall, one by one, overthrow nations. I have taught you from your childhoods that you were royalty. You shall soon see how right I am. But you are not just royalty. You will be royalty’s royalty. Kings will be your butlers and queens your maidservants. They will bow in your presence.

“Some of you are likely wondering how we are going to accomplish this. Our plan is perfect and already begun. We will take control of the world’s electricity. Electricity is the mother’s milk of civilization.

When we control the electricity we will control communications, health care, and the production and distribution of food.

“If a country tries to take over our plants, we will shut down their businesses. We will shut down their communications. We will cripple their economies, and they will crawl back to us for help. And we will help them—but on our terms and at our price. If they do not surrender to us, we will threaten other countries’ power until they fight for us. And *they will* fight for us. Survival is always the first rule of politics.”

Quentin raised his hand.

“Yes?” Hatch said.

“How do we *make* electricity?”

Hatch smiled. “Except for Torstyn, none of you have been briefed on our Starxource project, even though you were, indirectly, a part of its development. Now is the time for you to know. How do we make electricity? The same way that you do. When we are in Peru you will have a full tour of the facility. Our Starxource plants use a renewable, bioelectric source of power production.

“We are currently opening Starxource plants at the rate of a new facility every two months. Soon we will have that down to one plant a month. Then two plants a months. Then a plant a week.

“Countries are already begging for us to come in with our power. Why wouldn’t they? We offer them clean power at a fraction of the cost. It’s practically free. No pollution, no economic strain. Those who don’t turn to us will be at an economic disadvantage to those who do.

“Of course, this begs the question, why would we give away our electricity? Because we are like the drug dealer handing out free drugs on the schoolyard playground. Once the world is hooked, we will, of course, raise the prices and increase our demands until we own them.”

“We rule!” Bryan shouted.

Hatch smiled. “Yes, we will.”

Quentin raised his hand again. “Sir, how will we fight the Elgen? They have thousands of guards.”

“Which we will use to our advantage. In fact, we will soon be quadrupling our number of guards, all of whom will be trained by us in Peru. As for our current force, I have summoned all the guards

from Elgen facilities around the world. In two days they will be arriving in Peru for a two-week rehabilitation conference. The board believes this conference is to train our forces for their new roles in the Starxource plants, which, ironically, is true—just not in the roles the board expects.

“Our Peruvian force is our largest and is completely loyal to us. Soon *all* the Elgen guards will be loyal to us. We will choose our leaders and purge the rest of the force. When we are done, we will control the security forces within each plant. Anyone who does not follow my orders will be punished. Any questions?”

Suddenly the plane took a huge dip, knocking Hatch to the ground. Several of the teens screamed. An alarm began beeping and oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling.

“What’s happening?” Hatch shouted to the pilots. There was no answer. Hatch crawled to the cockpit and pulled open the door. “What’s happening?”

“We don’t know,” the copilot shouted. “We’ve lost power. Everything just went . . .”

Hatch didn’t wait for him to finish. He rushed to the fuselage, shouting to the guard. “Pull the screen!”

The guard, who was still belted in his chair, reached back and pulled the screen. Tanner was awake, his dark blue eyes looking at them.

“Shoot him!” Hatch shouted to the guard.

The guard didn’t move. He just stared, as if frozen.

“Shoot him before he kills us all. Now!”

The guard still hesitated.

Suddenly Tanner started screaming. “I’ll stop! I’ll stop!”

Hatch looked over to see Torstyn, his lip curled in anger, his hand extended toward Tanner. Then the guard hit Tanner over the head with his pistol, knocking him out.

The jet dropped again, then leveled out. Kylee and Bryan both threw up. It took several minutes for everyone to settle. After the plane was back on course the captain’s voice came over the PA system. “Sorry for the turbulence, everyone. We should be fine now.”

Hatch stood again, composing himself. "Well done, Torstyn," he said. "A round of applause for Torstyn, who just saved all of our lives."

Everyone clapped, even Quentin.

"You will be handsomely rewarded when we arrive in Peru."

"Thank you, sir," Torstyn said.

Hatch pointed at the psychiatrist. "You."

Dr. Jung was pale with fear.

"Sedate the boy until anesthetic flows from his tear ducts." Hatch's eyes narrowed. "Do not let him wake again until we're on the ground. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. He won't. It won't happen again. I promise."

"I should hope not. If he wakes again, I'll have both of you thrown out of the airplane. Are we clear on this?"

The doctor blanched. "Yes, sir. Very clear."

"Close the screen," he said to the guard.

"Yes, sir," the guard said, pulling the screen around the pair.

"We'll deal with your insubordination after we land."

"Yes, sir."

Hatch looked back at the youths. "Where were we?"



The plane landed in Rio de Janeiro to refuel, then quickly took off again, finally touching down at a small airfield near the Elgen's Peruvian compound, in the town of Puerto Maldonado.

The asphalt runway was surrounded by walls of trees that spilled outward from the burgeoning forest. The jet taxied to a small hangar where a contingency of Elgen guards and a bus were waiting to transport the group to the compound.

The plane stopped and a stairway unfolded from its side. A guard climbed to the top of the stairs and knocked on the door.

Bryan was the first one out, followed by the rest of the youths.

"Whoa," Bryan said. "It's hot. Like a furnace hot."

"And humid," Tara added. "My hair is going to be frizzy."

Torstyn rolled his eyes. "This is nothing. Wait until summer."

A moment later the guard walked out, followed by Hatch. The six Peruvian guards at the bottom of the stairs saluted Hatch as he emerged from the plane and descended the stairway. Hatch stopped at the bottom and returned the Elgen salute.

"Captain Figueroa," he said.

"Yes, sir!"

He pointed to the guard from the plane, who was not standing at attention. "This man disobeyed a direct order. His inaction nearly cost us our lives. Put him under arrest."

"Yes, sir," the captain snapped. "Guards at attention."

The Peruvian soldiers pointed their guns at the lone guard, who, in spite of his many years with the Elgen, was still caught off guard. He looked on in horror.

The captain stepped forward with his gun drawn, his other hand out. "Guard 247, surrender your gun. Slowly and by the barrel."

"Yes, sir," he said, his voice trembling. He slowly removed his gun from its holster and, holding it by its barrel, handed it to the captain.

"Put your hands behind your back. Now!"

He quickly obeyed.

"Secure this man," the captain barked.

"Sir, yes, sir." One of the soldiers ran up behind the guard and handcuffed the man's hands behind his back, fastening the metal belt through a buckle in the back of the guard's uniform.

The captain turned to Hatch. "Prisoner is secured. What are your orders, sir?"

Hatch scowled at the handcuffed guard. "Captain Figueroa, detain this man for now in maximum security. For the benefit of the visiting guards we're going to make an example of him. We're going to put him in the chute."

The condemned guard's face turned pale. "No, please, sir. Not that. I beg you!" He fell to his knees, bowing his head to Hatch's feet. "Please, sir. Anything but that! Shoot me. Please, shoot me."

Hatch sneered. "Show some dignity, man." He kicked the guard away from him. "Captain, keep him alive until I give you further instructions."

"No!" the man screamed. He tried to get to his feet to run, but he was knocked down before he could stand.

The teens watched the exchange with amusement.

"What a wimp," Torstyn said.

"What's the chute?" Tara asked.

"It's where they feed the rats," Torstyn said.

"What rats?"

He looked at her with a snide grin. "They really don't tell you much, do they?"

Several guards carried Tanner's gurney from the plane, escorted by Dr. Jung.

"Let's go," Hatch said to the captain. "Captain Figueroa."

"Yes, sir."

"Also detain Tanner and the doctor in maximum security until further notice."

The doctor turned white. "But, Dr. Hatch—"

"Don't speak to me," he said. "Or I'll send you to the chute as well."

The doctor froze.

"To the bus, please," Hatch said to the teens.

Tara said to Torstyn, "They're going to feed him to rats?"

"Yeah. It's a cool thing to watch."

"You've seen this before?" Quentin asked.

"Of course. Hundreds of times. Feeding time is better than the movies. I've seen the rats strip the meat off a two-thousand-pound bull in less than a minute."

"Awesome," Bryan said.

"Yeah, this guy will be a snack for them."

As Hatch and the kids approached the bus, a man wearing a white jacket and Panama hat, holding a spider monkey, walked up to Torstyn. "Here is your *mono*, Señor Torstyn."

"Hey, Arana," Torstyn said, taking his pet. He put the monkey on his shoulder, and it climbed up onto his head.

"Cute," Tara said, reaching out her hand.

"Yeah, wait until she bites you," Torstyn said.

Tara quickly pulled her hand back, and Torstyn laughed. Suddenly the monkey began screeching, then jumped off Torstyn's head and ran off toward the jungle.

"Arana!" he shouted after it. When it had disappeared into the jungle he turned back to Tara. "What did you do?"

Tara just smiled. "Nothing. You think I can get in an animal's head?"

"Yes," he said.

Quentin grinned. "Bad news for you, Torstyn. You thought you were safe."

Torstyn glared at both of them. "That was my pet," he said, turning away from them.

Quentin laughed. "We're definitely going to have fun in the jungle."



The Elgen's Peruvian Starxource plant was situated near the southeastern city of Puerto Maldonado, a jungle town in the Amazon Basin. It was the largest of the Elgen's compounds and built on a twenty-five-thousand-acre ranch hemmed in by jungle on all sides. Hatch and his team had selected the city for three reasons: First, it was remote, many miles away from curious eyes. Second, there was plenty of water, as the Río Madre de Dios, a tributary of the Amazon River, passed through the town; and third, it had an abundance of labor. Puerto Maldonado had once been a thriving logging and gold-mining camp, but both the gold and lumber were long gone, leaving few employment opportunities for the natives and guaranteeing an abundant workforce.

The compound had three main structures. The largest building was the Starxource power plant, called *el bol* by the natives, or "the bowl." The bowl was a massive, redbrick building with stainless steel casings that bulged out in the middle. Most said the bowl looked like a flying saucer had crashed into it. Just east of the building were three smaller buildings: the water house, the ranch house, and a food production plant.

West of the bowl was the Elgen Reeducation Center, or “Re-Ed,” as it was known by the guards, a rectangular building without windows used to rehabilitate uncooperative employees.

Connected to the Re-Ed by a brick corridor was the assembly hall, a massive building that could house more than two thousand people and served as both a cafeteria and an educational facility.

North of the assembly hall was residential housing, three long, rectangular buildings where the guards, scientists, and employees slept. Hatch, the electric children, and the Elite Guard—twelve men personally selected by Hatch to oversee the Elgen security force—had their own housing facilities on the west side of the Re-Ed.

The bus passed through two checkpoints during the drive into the compound, and even though the bus entered the gates only ten minutes from the airfield, it took a little more than thirty-five minutes for them to reach their housing facilities.

The youths were each assigned a guard and two personal assistants, all Peruvians who spoke English. While the assistants prepared their suites and oversaw the delivery of their luggage, the teens ate lunch in their private dining room. Afterward they gathered in the lobby of their new home, where Dr. Hatch was waiting for them.

“I know it’s not Beverly Hills,” Hatch said. “But I trust your suites are satisfactory.”

All of them agreed that their Peruvian accommodations were as luxurious as the academy in Pasadena.

“Then it will be my pleasure to give you a tour of your new home. I think you will be rather impressed with what we’ve built in the jungle. I know I am.” Hatch ushered them outside to a twelve-seat golf cart with a flashing amber light on top. The driver was a guard dressed in the standard uniform, except for a bright red patch featuring a condor, symbolic of the Chasqui, a special Elgen military order in Peru.

The teens boarded the cart and Hatch climbed up front with the driver and took the microphone. “Everything you’ll see on this tour is C9.”

The difference between C9 and C10 was that C9 could be discussed with other Elgen associates while in a secure Elgen facility.

Unlawful disclosure, however, carried the same punishment as C10.

“Onward,” Hatch said.

The cart made a sharp U-turn, then glided silently down the smooth, resin-coated cement floor past the Re-Ed and toward the Starxource plant. Two guards stood at attention as they approached, and the metal doors behind the guards opened.

The inside of the building looked similar to the lower laboratory of the Pasadena academy, only on a much larger scale. The building was more than a hundred yards from end to end, the length of a football field. The corridors were lit with bluish-white indirect lighting, giving the hallways a futuristic, eerie look. It took several minutes for the cart to reach their destination—the elevator to the bowl’s observation deck.

As they approached the room Hatch said, “What you are about to see is the heart of the Starxource program—the very core of our power and our future.” A grim smile crossed his face. “I guarantee you won’t soon forget it.”

The elevator opened to reveal a sealed door guarded by two Elgen guards dressed in black with red armbands. The guards stood stiffly at attention and saluted as Hatch stepped from the cart. One of the guards opened the door, and the kids filed in after Hatch.

Bryan was the first to comment on what they saw. “No way!” he shouted.



The teens had seen remarkable things in their lives, far more than normal teenagers, but nothing could have prepared them for the bowl. The observation deck was sixty feet long, and the inner wall, slightly convex, was made of glass, which allowed them a view of something few would ever see: nearly a million electrified rats.

The swarms of rats crawled over one another, creating an undulating, massive orange-and-gray carpet, and in parts of the bowl they looked like molten lava.

“What you’re looking at is almost a million rats, each of them capable of generating two hundred and fifty watts and two amps of electricity an hour; that’s five hundred watts a second, nearly identical wattage to the electric eel. Combined, that’s three hundred seventy-five million watts a second, more than enough to light downtown New York City.

“You can’t see it because of the rodents, but beneath them, the floor is a delicate, silver-coated copper grid, the largest ever constructed. Its purpose is to conduct electricity to the capacitors below. We also use the grid to solve the problem of waste, as the rats’

excrement drops below and is conveyed out to be processed into manure, more than twelve tons a day.”

“That’s a lot of crap,” Bryan said, punching Torstyn in the shoulder.

“Do that again and I’ll melt your head,” Torstyn said.

“What’s that big arm thing in the middle?” Quentin asked.

Connected to the center of the bowl was a curved metallic blade about three feet high and a hundred and forty feet long. The arm slowly swept the bowl like the second hand of a clock.

“That’s the sweep,” Hatch said. “The rats only generate usable amounts of electricity when they’re active, so the sweep makes a complete revolution of the bowl every ninety-six minutes, forcing the rats to continually move. If we need more power we simply increase the speed of the arm, generating more electricity. The sweep has another purpose as well. The angle of the blade forces anything on the grid to its outer rim—so it disposes of animal bones and dead rats, pushing their carcasses off the grid.”

“With the poop?” Bryan asked.

“No. The outer rim falls into special troughs that convey the dead rats into an electric grinder. There, the meat and bone are milled into powder, mixed with an iodine supplement and a glucose solution, then stamped and baked into biscuits, which our scientists call Rabisk—short for rat biscuits. We then feed them to the rats.”

Tara grimaced. “You mean they’re cannibals?”

“Rats are naturally cannibalistic, but ours are a little different. The electric rats won’t eat their own. Our scientists believe that they learn this from shocking each other when they’re young. So they won’t eat a rat, even a dead one, until it no longer looks like a rat, or until it’s been processed into Rabisk. It’s an extremely efficient way of feeding. When we first started this process we had some problems with the rat version of mad cow disease, but our rats only live nineteen months on average, so by genetically altering the rats we were able stave off the disease for their lifespan. Our rats die earlier than other rats because of their constant state of motion and the electricity that flows through them.”

“Where did you get so many rats?” Tara asked.

“The old-fashioned way,” Hatch said. “We bred them. Rats are one of the most efficient breeders of all the mammals on the planet. They are capable of producing offspring within six weeks of birth—compared to twelve to thirteen years for humans. It’s been speculated that two rats in an ideal breeding environment could produce more than a million offspring in their lifetime.

“Of course, until now, that has just been speculation. But we’ve proven it. We are able to create thousands of rats a day, far more than we need.” Hatch pointed to the far edge of the bowl. “See that small door there? You can just make out the outline. That is where new rats are delivered to the grid. We introduce about seventy new rats every hour, twenty-four/seven. In addition, we keep a twenty percent surplus of rats at all times, in case of disease.”

“What if they escaped?” Bryan said. “That would be awesome.”

“No,” Hatch said coldly. “That would not be *awesome*. In fact, it’s one of our greatest concerns. They would spread throughout the world like an epidemic. Rats are already the world’s leading cause of extinction. Electric rats like ours could destroy entire ecosystems.

“It would also allow anyone to breed our rats and create their own power source, something that would forever end our monopoly. So, as I said, it *would not be awesome*. And it will never happen. Our rats have been bioengineered to die outside of captivity. However, accidents happen. We had a few dozen rats escape before we reengineered them. It might have been an utter disaster, but fortunately the rats have a weakness. Water applied directly to their bodies kills them.”

“Like Zeus,” Kylee said.

Hatch spun around, his face twisted in fury. “What did you say?”

Kylee flushed as she realized what she had done—they were not allowed to speak Zeus’s name. The other youths looked at her with anger and sympathy.

“I—I didn’t mean to. . . . It just came out. I’m sorry. . . .”

“To your room,” Hatch said.

“I’m so sorry, sir. It will never happen again.”

“Indeed it won’t,” Hatch said. He turned to the guard. “Take her back. Punishment B.”

Kylee grimaced but dared not complain. Punishment B consisted of a full week of room confinement on a bread-and-water diet. During that time she would be required to write *I will not disobey Dr. Hatch's rules* ten thousand times.

Bryan grinned. "Have fun."

Kylee shot him a look as she walked away with the guard.

Quentin slowly shook his head. "That was dumb."

"It was just a mistake," Tara said softly. "Anyone could have made it."

"I'm just glad it was her and not me," Quentin said.

Just then an alarm sounded from inside the bowl.

"Hear that?" Hatch said. "We're in luck. You're going to get to watch the feeding."

"You're going to love this," Torstyn said to Tara. "The guards usually come up here on their breaks to watch."

Thirty yards to their right, a chute, about eight feet wide with metallic rollers, suddenly protruded from the wall. The feeding chute was connected to hydraulic lifts that extended it about twenty yards out from the bowl's side, slowly lowering it until the end of the chute dangled less than ten feet above the rats, which had already begun congregating around it. A door opened from the wall.

"Watch," Torstyn said. "Here it comes."

Suddenly a massive, long-horned bull slid down the chute. The animal's feet were tied together and it struggled against its bindings but was able to move only its head.

"What is that?" Bryan asked.

"It's a bull," Hatch said. "Raised on our own ranch. We passed many of them on our way in."

"It's still alive?" Tara asked, slightly grimacing.

"Always," Hatch said. "Fresh meat produces more electricity. Or, more accurately, struggling meat."

A spiked-wheel mechanism caught the animal near the bottom of the slide, and the end of the chute snapped in the middle, slowly tilting farther down until the animal was about six feet above the grid. The animal was desperately trying to free itself.

“The chute can’t touch the grid or it will damage it,” Torstyn explained. “The grid, as a whole, can hold more than a thousand tons, but square by square it’s actually pretty fragile.”

In anticipation of their meal, the rats clambered to the chute, climbing on top of one another in a massive wave of fur that glowed a dull red like a hot plate. For the first time since they’d arrived, the glistening copper grid was partially visible, as the rodents were all gathered beneath the chute. When the bull was lowered within a yard of the grid, rats began jumping up onto the animal.

“I didn’t know rats could jump that high,” Quentin said.

“They look like spawning salmon,” Bryan said.

“Rats can jump up to forty inches vertical,” Hatch replied. “That’s the equivalent of a human jumping three stories.”

Within seconds the bull was completely covered by the rodents in a wild feeding frenzy. The rats increased in brightness like a filament. Blue, white, and yellow electricity arced around the carcass, and steam and smoke rose around the bull. The arcs and colors, highlighted by the steam, were, in a peculiar way, beautiful to look at—like the aurora borealis.

“The vapor you see comes from the rats’ electricity against the bull. They’re actually cooking the meat with their bodies,” Hatch said. “That’s a rat barbecue.”

“Look!” Bryan said excitedly. “They’ve already stripped its legs to the bone.”

Within three minutes the bull was reduced to nothing but skeleton. Even its internal organs were eaten.

“They’re like furry piranhas,” Quentin said. “I’d hate to be down there.”

“Wait,” Tara said. “You mean, that’s what they’re going to do to that guard on our flight? Put him on *that* chute?”

“Yep,” Torstyn said.

Tara covered her mouth. “I’m going to be sick.”

The chute began to retract and lift, dropping the animal to the floor of the grid as it moved. Then the door at the top of the chute opened again and another bull slid out.

“How many bulls will they eat?” Tara asked.

“Our rats are a little more voracious than your average house rat,” Hatch replied. “Still, they don’t eat that much. About an ounce to an ounce and a half a day. But with this many rats, that still equates to twenty-nine tons of food a day. They’re omnivorous, so they eat a combination of grains and meat. Every day we go through about ten tons in raw meat, about five bulls, and the rest are in Rabisk and grain. But they prefer the meat, especially since fresh food helps quench their thirst and drinking water can be a little tricky for them.”

“How do they drink?” Quentin asked.

Dr. Hatch smiled. “Very carefully.” He pointed to the vacant side of the bowl. “See those white ceramic disks? They’re drinking fountains for rats. They’re exactly one tenth of a millimeter beneath the grid—just close enough that the rats can lick water off them.”

After the second bull had been devoured, Hatch ordered the teens back to the elevator. “There’s more to see,” he said.

They made the rounds through the laboratory and corridors around the bowl. The MEI room and breeding labs were connected directly to the bowl for ease of operation. They toured the Rabisk plant, which smelled so bad they had to wear nose plugs. Men in white coats walked back and forth between different machines, measuring output, then sending the small biscuits to the oven, then back to the feeding rooms.

“This side of the facility is our meat processing center and next to that is our ranch house, where our *gauchos* live.”

Before they left the facility Hatch pointed out one last section of the building. “These are the cells where we inter our traitors and GPs who have outlived their usefulness. You might also call this a meat processing facility. Our guards call it death row. You’ll recognize our newest guest.” They looked in to see the guard from the plane.

“You should show him the bowl,” Bryan said.

Hatch replied, “If we were trying to get information from him or instill a behavioral change, the fear would be of some value. But, as it is, his course is set, so to show him the bowl would serve no useful purpose.”

They walked from the cells back out to the lobby, where the cart was waiting. As they climbed aboard, an overhanging door rose ahead

of them, and they drove out into the yard. The walks of the compound were all open but covered, as the weather on Puerto Maldonado was usually temperate, though subject to a heavy rainy season. The guard drove around the building to the south, the transmission substation.

“Nothing here you haven’t seen before,” Hatch said. “This is where the power that comes from the plant is dispersed. It feeds from our transmission substation over high-voltage transmission lines to local power substations and then to homes and businesses as far away as Lima.

“You can compare our system to the human body. Our power plant is the heart. The high-voltage lines are major arteries, which break down into veins, then capillaries, eventually feeding into individual homes and businesses. Electricity is truly the lifeblood of civilization.

“Over the last two years we’ve helped the Peruvian government lay miles of high-voltage power lines. If we were to shut down, all of Puerto Maldonado, Cuzco, and the surrounding cities would also shut down. Even more impressive is that two of Peru’s largest cities would also be majorly impacted: Eighty percent of Arequipa and almost half of Lima would go dark. Within a year, we will be powering ninety-five percent of the country.” A smile crossed his thin lips. “At which point, we’ll own the country.” He looked out over the station with satisfaction.

“They should have been more cautious. ‘Beware the stranger offering gifts, as true for man as it is for fish,’” Hatch said slowly. “So it is.”

* * *

The next building the cart stopped at was the Reeducation Center. The cart pulled up to a door made of thick steel and attended by two guards who, like the guards at the bowl, stood at attention and saluted Dr. Hatch.

The doors opened, and the group walked into a holding area with a second set of doors.

“This looks like a prison,” Tara said, her voice echoing.

“It’s much more than that,” Hatch said. “This is our Reeducation Center. It’s here that we help our enemies change their minds.”

“You brainwash them?” Quentin asked.

Hatch gave him a disapproving glance. “This is where we *teach* these misguided souls the error of their thinking. Sometimes it takes a while, but you would be surprised at just how malleable the human brain can be. In the right environment the mind can be molded like clay. Men and women walk in here as enemies and come out as devotees, willing to lay down their lives for our cause.”

After the first door had locked behind them, the second door clicked, then opened, and the teens walked into the main hall. The floors were smooth, resin-coated concrete, and the walls were dark red brick.

Hatch spoke as they walked. “Pavlov taught us the rules of conditioning—but he also taught us that the human mind can be quickly converted from years of training to a new way of thinking by a single traumatic experience.

“We can induce that kind of trauma through punishment—but we’ve also discovered that the mere *threat* of punishment can be just as effective. So, of course, we show them the rats.”

Through Plexiglas windows the teens could see rows of men in pink, flowered jumpsuits sitting on long benches watching films.

“Why are they wearing pink?” Bryan asked.

“Everything you see has a reason. They are dressed in clothing that embarrasses and humiliates them. How strong can you be dressed as a little girl?”

Tara and Bryan snickered.

“You would be surprised at how powerful something as simple as changing someone’s clothing can be. Psychologists and fashion designers have long known that changing someone’s appearance can alter their self-perception. And when you change someone’s self-perception, you change their behavior.

“Of course, we also change their names. In our case we give them numbers. When they no longer can identify with who they were, they begin to doubt their own thoughts and feelings. It is then that we can implant them with our truths.

“We didn’t discover all this, of course—we had the Korean War and Vietnamese reeducation camps to learn from—but I’m proud to say we’ve significantly advanced the science. We have the benefit of using procedures they never dreamed of.” He put his hand on Tara’s shoulder. “Like emulating Tara’s gifts. We can make them doubt their own sanity within minutes. And, like their identity, once they doubt their sanity, we’re most of the way there.

“What we discovered is that the more people think they can’t be controlled, the easier subjects they make. What the masses don’t realize is that they’re looking for a shepherd. Those who don’t think they can be influenced or call themselves ‘independent thinkers’ are usually the biggest conformists of all—and the easiest to turn. Why do you think cults prey on college students? Easy picking.”

“You make it sound simple,” Quentin said.

Hatch looked at him and smiled. “It is when you know what you’re doing.” He stopped near an open door to a theater room. Nearly two dozen inmates were seated quietly on the ground even though there were enough seats for everyone. “Take a seat, everyone,” Hatch said to the youths. “Everyone except Tara.” The group quickly found seats. Tara stood anxiously, unsure if she’d done something wrong. “While I speak to Tara, I’d like you to view one of the films we’ve produced so you understand how the newly reeducated think and act. In the meantime I have an errand. I’ll be back when the film is over. Tara, if you’ll come with me.”

“Yes, sir.” Tara followed Hatch out of the room. In the hallway Hatch turned to her. “We have a little visit to make. I need your help.”

“You need my powers?” she asked with relief.

“No,” Hatch replied. “I need your face.”



Thirty-four marks. Sharon Vey had counted the days of her captivity by scratching marks into the concrete floor of her cell. Her room was only ten by ten, two-thirds of it occupied by her metal cage.

She was sitting back against the bars when Hatch walked into the room. “Hello, Sharon.” A buzzer went off and he typed in the required code. Mrs. Vey turned away from him.

“Miss me?” Hatch asked.

Still no answer.

“I trust your accommodations are to your satisfaction.”

“You can’t keep me here.”

“Of course we can.”

“You won’t get away with this. They’ll find me.”

Hatch’s brow furrowed with mock concern. “*Who* will find you?”

Mrs. Vey didn’t answer. She knew it was a stupid thing to say. No one would find her here. She wasn’t even sure where she was.

“Surely you don’t mean that inept little police department in Meridian, Idaho. In the first place, we own them. Secondly, you, my dear, are a long, long way from Idaho. And the only way you’re ever going to get back there is if you no longer wish to return.”

“I know who you are,” she said.

“Do you?” He sat down in the room’s lone chair, an amused grin blanketing his face. “Don’t make me wait, tell me.”

“You’re Jim Hatch.”

“I prefer Dr. Hatch, but yes, they used to call me that.”

“My husband told me about you.”

“And what, exactly, did your late husband have to say?”

“He said you are an unstable, diabolical, delusional man with megalomaniac tendencies.”

Hatch smiled. “Did he also tell you that I’m dangerous?”

Mrs. Vey looked at him coldly. “Yes.”

“That’s the thing about your husband, he always called a spade a spade.”

“Where is my son?”

“We have him safely locked away as we reeducate him.”

“I want to see him.”

“When we’re done, you’ll see him. When he’s broken and subservient, you’ll see him. You may not recognize him anymore, but you’ll definitely see him.”

“You’ll never break him.”

“On the contrary. If psychology has taught us anything, it’s that everyone has a breaking point. *Everyone.*”

“I want to see my son!” she shouted.

“Poignant. Really, I’m moved. A mother crying out for her son. But what *you* want is of no relevance. All that matters is what *I* want. Besides, he’s not ready. He’s a special boy. And when we’re done, he’ll be of great value to our cause.”

“You have no cause except your own lust for power.”

Hatch grinned darkly. “You make that sound like it’s a bad thing.” He leaned toward the bars. “The lust for power is the only way the world has ever changed. Of course we dress it up in noble intentions, but in the end politics and religion are like sausage—it may be good, but it’s best not to know what goes into it.

“Trust me, the day will come when I will be honored as the visionary I am.”

“You’re delusional,” Mrs. Vey said.

Hatch smiled. "All great men are delusional. How else could they be crazy enough to think they could change the world?" He leaned back. "The day will come when I will be as celebrated as George Washington is today. And the electric children, including yours, will be held up and worshipped as the pioneers of a new world order. You should be pleased to know that your son will be held in such high esteem. You cling to the past only because you fear change. But nothing good comes without change. *Nothing*. Change is evolution, nothing more. And if it wasn't for evolution you'd still be living in a tree eating bananas."

Mrs. Vey just looked at him.

"Speaking of eating, has anyone told you what *you've* been eating for the past month? Those tasty little biscuits are called Rabisk. They're made of ground-up rats: meat, fur, and bonemeal."

Her stomach churned.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet." He walked to the cell door and opened it. "You may come in now."

Tara walked in. "Hi, Mrs. Vey."

Mrs. Vey looked at her with surprise. "Taylor?"

Tara smiled. "It's so good to see you."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to help. What Dr. Hatch is doing is wonderful. For all of us."

"Have you seen Michael?"

"Of course."

"How is he?"

"He's great. He's having a good time."

Mrs. Vey couldn't believe what she was hearing. "A good time? Has he asked about me?"

Tara shook her head. "No. I mean, he knows you're okay and we're all just so busy and going places. But I'm sure he'll find time to visit before too long."

Mrs. Vey knew her son better than that. Something was wrong with the situation. Something about the girl's eyes was different—not the color or shape of her eyes, but something less definable. It was the light in them. Or lack of it.

“Does Michael still wear the watch you gave him for his birthday?” Mrs. Vey asked.

Tara hesitated. “Uh, most of the time. Not when he plays basketball or stuff.”

Mrs. Vey nodded. “So, Taylor. What do your parents think of you leaving home?”

“They’re really happy for me.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. They’re so proud that I can make a difference in this world.”

“Even your dad?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t he be?”

“Well, you know how schoolteachers worry about kids. Especially their own.”

“No, he’s good with it all. He’s good.”

Mrs. Vey stared at her for a moment, then breathed out slowly. “No, he’s not. Your father’s not a schoolteacher, he’s a police officer. And you didn’t give Michael that watch for his birthday. I did.”

Tara glanced nervously at Dr. Hatch.

“Who are you and why do you look just like Taylor?” Mrs. Vey asked.

Hatch slowly shook his head. “It was worth a try. Sharon, this is Tara, Taylor’s lost twin. And she’s going to be your new best friend. Every day until we bring Michael in, she’s going to make your stay a little more . . . interesting. Just like she did for your son.”

“What did you do to him?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Tara, Mrs. Vey likes rats. She’s been eating them for weeks now. So, for your first session,” Hatch said, tapping his temple with his index finger, “I think you should give her a few hundred to keep her company.”

“Yes, sir,” Tara said.

“Thirty minutes’ worth.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hatch smiled. “Very well. I’ll go now and let you two get better acquainted.”

* * *

Hatch walked back to the others, who were still in the theater. “Let’s go,” he said.

The youths immediately stood, unnoticed by the others in the room. When they were outside the theater, Bryan asked, “How many times do they have to watch that movie?”

“As many times as they need,” Hatch replied. “A few of these prisoners have seen this particular presentation more than a thousand times. Remember, repetition breeds conviction.

“When the prisoners are brought in for reeducation, they go through our boot camp, a carefully orchestrated psychological assault guaranteed to drive them to submission or madness. We’ll take either. First they are shown a rat feeding, then told that they will be fed to the rats the next morning. While they await their fate they enter phase one: They are locked naked in a three-by-three cell without food or water. We call this ‘think time’—time for them to contemplate the fragility of their own mortality and their own powerlessness.

“In their cell there is no sound, no darkness, just a bright light and their impending death. Since there is neither a clock nor contact with the outer world, they do not know when it is night or day, and minutes begin to feel like days. On the third day they are given two cups of water and three Rabisk biscuits. They are told that their fate is still being considered.

“They then enter phase two. During the next seventy-two hours loud music is piped into their cube, nonstop. We usually choose something primal with a heavy beat, like heavy metal or grunge, as we find that it has a decidedly *unsettling* effect. Believe me, it works.

“After those three days comes phase three. The music stops. They are told that due to the mercy of the Elgen and because we believe that they still might be saved, their life has been temporarily spared. This is when their education begins. We start by playing a looped audio presentation we call *The Scold*. This recording consists of different voices screaming at them, condemning them for their crimes against humanity. After three days of *The Scold* they are usually

reduced to whimpering idiots. They are then invited to confess their crimes, real or imagined.” Hatch grinned. “You’d be surprised what they come up with.

“They are then reviewed by one of our therapists, and if they are sufficiently penitent, they are moved to a cell and allowed brief interaction with others—in supervised group therapy, of course. It is here that they are given a new identity. They are allowed to confess and seek forgiveness. All this time they are allowed only four hours of sleep a night, and the rest of their time is filled with studying the Elgen plan of forgiveness and our new global order. Every moment is planned, and they become deeply dependent on us. By the end of the process, they belong to the order and we reinforce their condition by allowing them to help reeducate others. It’s a beautiful thing to watch.”

Tara appeared in the hallway.

“How did it go?” Hatch asked.

“Good. She’s strong, but not that strong. She passed out.”

“Next time tone it back so she experiences the full therapeutic effect.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hatch looked back at the group. “It’s time for dinner. I want you to go to bed at a reasonable hour. The guards begin arriving early tomorrow. We have a special few days ahead, and I want you at your best for all of it. This is the time for you to show them who you are.” Hatch smiled. “My eagles.”



The next morning the Elgen guards began arriving from the thirty-eight Starxource plants around the globe. There were more than two thousand Elgen guards worldwide, and they made up an fierce, well-trained, and well-equipped security force.

They were met at the airport by Hatch's Peruvian guards. The men were disarmed, then led immediately into orientation.

One of Hatch's Elite Guards informed him of the first arrival. "The guards are arriving, sir."

"How many?"

"Three buses, a hundred and forty-seven men."

"What condition are they in?"

"Exhausted."

"Good," he said. "Don't let them sleep."

"A few have already lain on the ground."

"Then get them up and run them. Has there been any insubordination?"

"Some."

"Good," Hatch said. "We need examples. Arrest them. We'll be showcasing them tonight. You know my plans, make sure they are

followed to the letter.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hatch had organized the guards' flights to be as long and tiring as possible, so they would be exhausted upon arrival. When the guards landed, they were also given drinks lightly laced with Trazodone, a mild antidepressant that is often used as a sleep aid, causing drowsiness, light-headedness, and confusion. Hatch's plan was first to break the men down physically through drugs, labor, lack of sleep, and hunger. Then, when they were near collapse, he'd break them mentally. In their weakened condition, the guards would reveal their true loyalties and Hatch would divide them into “sheep” and “goats.” The sheep, those who would enthusiastically follow Hatch, he would train and advance to leadership rank, repositioning them to take control of Starxource plants or Elgen compounds. The goats, or those who did not cooperate, would be reeducated. If after several weeks they were still troublesome, he would extinguish them. There was no room for defiance.

Upon their arrival, the guards were put to work digging a large trench on the far side of the ranch. The trench had absolutely no purpose but to keep the men working. When darkness fell, the exhausted guards were driven back to the compound and assigned to their barracks. They were instructed to put on their guard uniforms and report to the mess hall for dinner.

The men were served small meals; peas and carrots, salad, and *cuy*—a local Peruvian delicacy of fried guinea pig. Many of the men complained about the food, and there was a small uprising at one table that was immediately quelled by the Peruvian guards. The two most demonstrative protestors were arrested and taken away.

At 9:00 p.m. the men were sent back to their barracks and told to sleep, as their day would begin early the next morning. It was only a ruse, as less than two hours later a shrill buzzer rang throughout the compound and all lights came on. Armed Peruvian guards walked into each barrack, waking the men and marching them to the assembly hall, where they were told to stand quietly at attention in front of metal chairs. A few more complained of their treatment and were quickly taken away by the Peruvian guards.

The room they had been congregated in was large enough to hold all two thousand men. The metal chairs faced a raised stage at the front of the hall. There was a podium in the middle of the stage flanked by twelve guards, six on each side, dressed in black, with purple and scarlet chest emblems and armbands on the right arm. The Elgen logo was projected on the screen behind them in letters twenty feet high. At exactly midnight a loud bell sounded and the guard to the right of the podium walked up to the microphone.

“Elgen Force. Salute.”

The men gave the Elgen salute.

“The weak among you may sit.”

The men looked at one another. A few sat—collapsed, really—but most, in spite of their exhaustion, remained standing.

“Many of you have flown from halfway around the world. I have heard complaints from the weak that you are tired. I would expect such complaints from weaker men. But you are not men. You are Elgen.”

This was followed by applause among the standing.

“It is my distinct privilege to bring to this stage our supreme commander and president. A true visionary the world will someday acknowledge. The weak who are sitting will rise with the strong for President C. J. Hatch.”

The room broke into applause as Quentin and Torstyn walked onto the stage, taking their places on each side of the podium, in front of the Elite Guards. Then Hatch walked in from the side of the stage to the podium. The guard who had introduced Hatch quickly stepped back as he approached. Hatch saluted him, then stepped up to the microphone. The audience stilled while he looked them over.

Hatch spoke in a soft voice. “Sit down. Sit down, please. All of you.” He waited for everyone to sit. “Greetings, my friends. It is just past midnight. A new day, literally and figuratively. Today is the beginning of a new day for each of you. When you came into our employment you were fully aware that this was not merely a job but a cause far greater than any mission you ever will have or ever will bear—a cause of greater importance than even your own life. Today the fullness of our cause is revealed. Today you will begin to understand

the depth of our campaign and the level of your own commitment. Yesterday you were mere men. Today you are Elgen.”

The hall echoed with loud applause.

“The sleeping minions of this world may not have heard of the Elgen yet. But they will.”

More applause.

“The sleeping minions of this world may not yet be trembling at the mention of our name and power. But they will.”

More applause.

Hatch pounded the podium furiously. “Presidents, prime ministers, and kings may not be bowing to us yet, but mark my words—they will.”

The audience rose to their feet in wild applause.

“I now introduce the new order. These soldiers standing next to me, wearing the Elgen uniform of purple and scarlet, are my Elite Global Guard. *You* will refer to them as the Elite Guard. You may have noticed that their acronym is EGG. Like eggs, there are a dozen of them. Only I will affectionately refer to them as my EGGs. You will not.

“You will obey their commands as if they came from me. To disobey their orders is tantamount to disobeying me.

“In the first three rows, directly beneath the Elite Guard, wearing scarlet armbands, are the Zone Captains. The ZCs are the leaders of a global zone of Squad Captains.

“Now hear me and hear me well. Your previous chain of command no longer exists. From this moment on, you will no longer take orders from weak-bodied scientists and weak-minded bureaucrats!”

Hatch’s pronouncement was met with loud applause.

“You will answer only to me, the EGGs, your Zone Captains, and, most often, your Squad Captain. Squad Captains wear the purple Elgen uniform and are responsible for each and every one of the members within their squad, which will number between six and twelve. Let me repeat the hierarchy. Your Squad Captain will answer to a Zone Captain, who will answer to one of the twelve Elite, who answer only to me.

“In addition to your Squad Captains, there will be one or two Elgen Secret Police, known to us as ESP, in each squad. These men are primarily informants. You will not know who they are. This force constitutes the eyes and ears of our organization and will communicate directly with the Zone Captains and, if necessary, the Elite Guard. Any sign of insubordination within a squad will be dealt with swiftly and severely.

“It’s a brave new world, gentlemen. Those of you who are with me will prosper far beyond your wildest imaginations. Governors and magistrates will bow at your feet and clean your boots with their tongues.” His voice lowered threateningly. “But those who defy me will learn suffering they never imagined possible. I would like to demonstrate what I mean. You are all familiar with the Starxource energy grid. Captain Welch, please take us live to the bowl.”

The image on the screen behind Hatch changed, revealing a close-up of the bowl’s chute, which had already started moving out from the wall. When the chute reached its extremity, the door in the wall opened. A man’s black boot appeared, followed by the rest of his body as he was pushed out and the door shut behind him. The guard was fully dressed in Elgen uniform and bound at his legs and wrists. As the chute lowered, he desperately tried to hold on to the sides of the chute, but it was impossible. He slid on the metal rollers to the bottom of the chute, where he was caught by the cog, which was hanging just a few yards from the grid.

Within seconds the guard was covered with rats. His amplified screaming echoed through the entire hall for less than a minute, leaving the men silent. After just ninety seconds the man’s skeleton was ejected from the chute. The camera zoomed in on the shredded uniform and the bone remains of the guard.

“They go much quicker than the bulls, don’t they?” Hatch said without emotion.

The room was silent as Hatch looked over the audience. Hatch nodded to one of the guards, and three men dressed in pink girls’ party dresses were led out, bound and shackled. Their mouths and chins were covered with tape. They all had large bows on their heads.

“Cute, aren’t they?” Hatch said.

The men in the audience laughed loudly.

“These so-called men arrived at our conference with the wrong attitude. How unfortunate for them. They will not leave us with those attitudes, simply because they will not be leaving us at all. If you once knew these men, you will be doing yourself a favor to disassociate with them, as they are traitors and fools. And they are part of tomorrow’s entertainment, for they are all headed to the chute. But first you will be allowed the privilege of letting them know how you feel about traitors.

“Elgen Force, do not make their fate yours. Over the next two weeks we are going to introduce a new food group to our rodents’ diet. Every day, for the next fourteen days, one of you will meet these men’s fate. One of you each day.”

The men were all silent, none daring to move or speak.

“We will select our fourteen ‘meals’ by monitoring your level of cooperation and performance. Each day we’ll nominate three of you, but only one of you will be chosen, and that will be my decision. If you are nominated twice, then you will automatically be selected. Our informants are already in place. From this moment on, anything and everything you say and do *will* be used for or against you.”

Hatch paused for emphasis. “If you think you can beat this system, think again. For those among you who have seditious thoughts, remember that the friend you invite to join you will rejoice in your treachery, because, and excuse the pun, to ‘rat out’ a disloyal guard is the fastest way to ensure your own survival.

“Each of you will be given a new Elgen rule book. It looks like this.” Hatch held up a navy book with gold embossing. “This is your new *Bible*. It is only thirty-six pages long. Over the next five days you are to memorize the entire book. Every line. Every word. And yes, there will be a test. Two of them. The two guards with the lowest score will automatically be included as two of the fourteen meals. So, for your sake, I recommend that you know the book well.”

Hatch nodded to one of the EGGs standing by the side of the stage. The guard saluted, then gave a hand signal, and twelve other guards—the ESP Captains—walked to the front of the stage. They wore scarlet berets and sashes across their chests.

Each of the captains had an assistant at their side, a guard dressed in black, with yellow and black striped armbands. The assistants wheeled a stainless steel cart with a black, metal box on top that resembled a large toaster. The box had several dials and knobs and a white meter with a needle. Two long red wires protruded from the side of the box leading to finger clamps. On a lower shelf on the cart was a box of books.

The ESP Captains sat down at black, plastic chairs while the assistants assembled the apparatus, then stacked the books on the ground next to them. The preparations were carried out quickly and sharply.

At the same time the three men in dresses were led from the stage down to the auditorium's exit. The men were forced to their knees and shackled together, facing outward in a triangle.

"This is how you will receive your Elgen rule book," Hatch said. "Each of you will have the opportunity to take the Elgen oath of loyalty. Should you choose to make this commitment, and I strongly advise that you do so, you will come up to the front and stand in the queue until it is your turn. When you are summoned to the podium, you will have sensors placed on the fingers of your right hand. The administrator will be reading his monitor as you take the oath. If you are lying he will know it.

"You will put your right hand on the Elgen rule book, raise your left arm, and repeat the oath after the administrator." Hatch lifted a paper from the podium and read, "I swear on my life, breath, and fortune to prosper the Elgen cause, to advance its mission until every man and woman on earth have sworn allegiance to the *Novus Ordo Glorificus* Elgen, our new glorious order. I offer up my life and death to this endeavor and will follow all rules contained in this book and those that will come, with fidelity, honor, and exactness. I swear this oath on my life."

He set the paper down and looked over the group. "You will then make the Elgen salute and bow to the administrator and remain bowed until he accepts or rejects your oath. If he accepts your oath he will hand you the contract to sign. You will then be given your rule

book and you will go to the adjoining hall to await further instruction and, if you are wise, start memorizing your rule book.”

A guard stepped forward and whispered something to Hatch.

“Of course,” Hatch said. “Let me remind you that as you pass out of this room you may make known your disdain for the three men who have shamed us all with their weakness. Elgen are not weak. When you are through with these pitiful little girls, what is left of them will be fed to the rats.

“Now, back to you. If your administrator rejects your oath, you will be sent to the end of the queue for another opportunity. If you fail your oath the second time, you will be taken to a separate hall. I will not tell you what will happen there. Those of you who merit that placement will learn soon enough.”

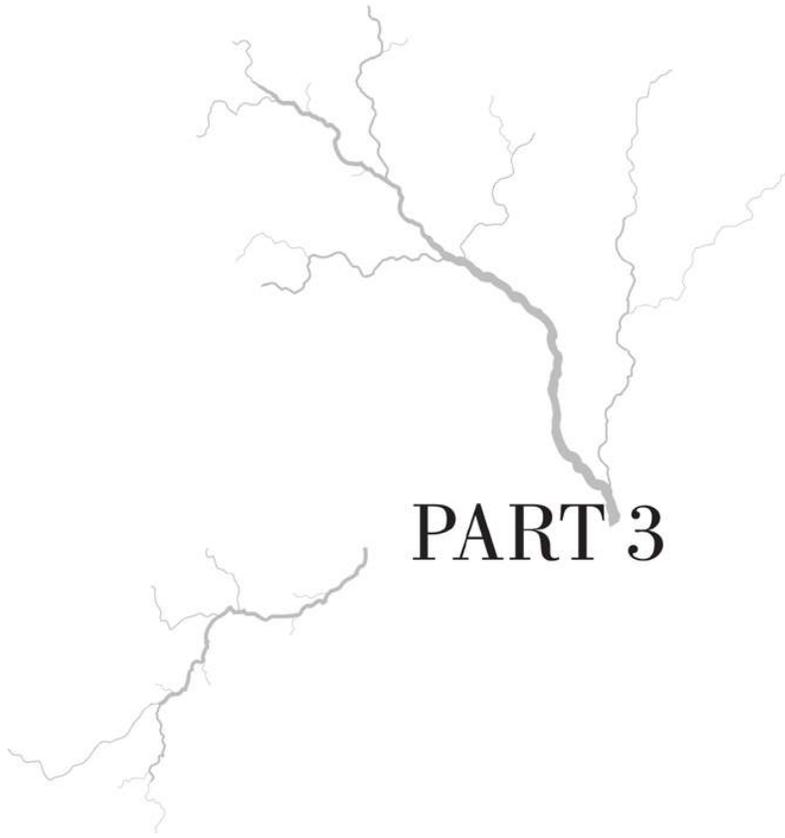
He stopped talking, looking out over the silent audience. “I ask those of you who do not wish to take this oath to remove yourselves from our company immediately. If any of you wish to leave, you may raise your hand at this time.”

There was a pause, then one lone hand in the crowd went up. Guards in red immediately surrounded the man and escorted him out of the room, amid the whispers and buzzing of the remaining men.

After he was gone Hatch smiled. “Gentlemen, I think we just found our first meal.”

Nervous laughter skittered through the crowd.

“It is now time for you to make a decision that will affect your life, the lives of billions, and history itself. Time for you to choose your paths. Gentlemen, welcome to the future.”



PART 3



Our plane landed at night at the Cuzco airport. I had never left the United States before, and standing in a foreign airport where all the signs were in a different language filled me with anxiety. We walked out of the terminal. The air was warm and moist.

“My head is killing me,” Wade said, grimacing.

“I have a headache too,” Taylor said. “It started as soon as we landed.”

“It’s altitude sickness,” Ostin said. “Cuzco’s elevation is eleven thousand feet, more than double Idaho’s.”

“Does it go away?” Taylor asked.

“Not always,” Ostin said. “I read that the best remedy is to drink coca tea. In fact, that’s what that lady is selling over there.”

Everyone glanced over at a brightly dressed native woman who was holding a plastic bag filled with green leaves.

“Now what?” Jack asked.

“Someone’s supposed to meet us,” I said.

“Who?”

“No idea.”

“Anyone speak Spanish?” I asked.

“*Yo hablo español*,” Ostin said.

“Besides you, Ostin.”

“I know a little,” Abigail said. “My uncle is Mexican. He used to teach me words. But it’s been a few years.”

“Beautiful *and* bilingual,” Zeus said.

“Suck-up,” Jack said under his breath.

“But you can still speak some?” I asked hopefully.

“A little,” Abigail said. “And I can understand a lot of it.”

“So it’s Ostin and Abi,” I said.

Just then a man walked up to me. He was poorly dressed and held out his hand. “*Tiene dinero?*”

“What did he say?” I asked Ostin.

“He wants money,” Ostin said.

I took a dollar out of my pocket and handed it to him. “I only have American dollars.”

Ostin translated. “*Yo tengo sólo dinero americano.*”

The man nodded. “*Gracias, Señor Michael.*”

I looked at him. “Did you say . . . ?”

“*Sí,*” the man said. “Mr. Michael, the bus is for you and your friends.” He cocked his head toward a medium-size tour bus that was parked next to the curb. The bus had dark tinted windows. When I turned back the man was already walking away.

“Guys,” I said. “Over here.”

We started toward the bus.

“What do you think?” I asked Ian.

“It looks clean,” he said. “The driver has a gun, but nothing you, Taylor, or Zeus couldn’t take out if you had to.”

“I expect him to be armed,” I said. “Where we’re going, he probably needs it.”

The bus shook as its engine started up, and the doors opened as we approached. From the curb I looked inside. The driver was a Peruvian man, stocky, and at least twice my age. He watched us carefully as we climbed aboard, counting or mumbling something as each of us got on. The moment we were all inside, the driver shut the door and pulled away from the curb, clearly in a hurry.

Taylor and I sat together about four rows from the front. Everyone else was behind us.

“He kind of reminds me of my grade school bus driver,” Taylor said. “About as friendly, too.”

“Do you think he speaks English?” I asked.

She shrugged. “No idea.”

I walked up to the front, crouching down in the aisle next to the driver. “Excuse me,” I said. “What’s your name?”

He kept his eyes fixed on the dark road. “It is not important,” he said with a thick accent.

“Where are you taking us?”

“Chaspi,” he said.

“Chaspi?”

“You will see.”

“How far are we from Puerto Maldonado?”

“Far,” he said. “Far.”

I guessed he was being purposely vague, so I went back to my seat.

“What did he say?” Taylor asked.

“As little as he could,” I replied. I looked out the window. We were traveling away from the city lights into dark, forested hills.

“Do we even know where we’re going?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “To the Elgen.”

Elgen. The name filled me with dread. In spite of how hard we had worked to get here, I was still having a difficult time controlling my fear. My tics were going crazy.

When we were in the middle of nowhere, the driver lifted the microphone. “Amigos. We are going off the highway up ahead onto a small side road so you can sleep. There are many trees overhead so the helicopters or satellites cannot see us. We cannot take the chance of staying at a hotel. The Elgen are very careful to know who is coming near them. This bus has a bathroom and there is food for you. The seats lean back most of the way, and there is a pillow and blankets above you. I am sorry it is not a real bed, but I know where you are going and it will be the best bed you will have for some time.

“You will start your journey in a few hours. We will hike a small distance to the river, where there is a boat waiting for you.”

Zeus was already asleep, which I was glad about. I didn’t think he’d like the idea of being in a boat.

“Can’t we just take the road?” I asked.

“No. The road is not safe. The Elgen make many roadblocks and checkpoints. You will ride the boat up the Río Madres de Dios, a tributary of the Amazon River, and will be let out in the jungle near the Elgen compound. You will arrive a little before morning. There you will be on your own. So please, get what sleep you can.”



That night I had a nightmare. I dreamed I was being chased through a dark maze by a beast. I never saw it, but I could hear its snarls and growling behind me, always just at my heels. The maze I was running through had hundreds of doors, but every one I tried was locked. I kept hearing my mother shouting out my name, but I couldn't tell where her voice was coming from. I just kept running. When I was in center of the maze, I heard her voice coming from the very last door. Relieved, I opened it. Dr. Hatch was standing there. He started laughing. When he opened his mouth, his tongue was a snake, and its body curled around me, constricting me. That's when I woke up.

It took me a moment to remember where I was. I could hear voices—two men speaking in Spanish. I looked out my window. In the moonlight I could see the men standing near the front of the bus. One was our driver, his face illuminated by a cigarette. The other was a man I hadn't seen before. I glanced over at Taylor. She was still asleep, and I could hear Ostin snoring behind me. I got up and walked to the front of the bus.

The man speaking to our driver looked up at me. He was carrying a machete. "*Buenos días, señor,*" he said.

"Buenos días," I repeated, which was pretty much the extent of my Spanish. I stepped outside with the men. "I'm Michael."

"Yes, Michael. I know you from your picture. I am Jaime. Are your friends ready?"

"They're still sleeping."

"You must wake them now. They can sleep on the boat. We must soon go. Timing is everything."

"Now?"

He nodded.

I climbed back on the bus and woke everyone. It was probably two or three in the morning, so, not surprisingly, no one was happy about the wake-up call.

As I headed back to my seat, the man with the machete walked onto the bus carrying a large sack over his shoulder. "Amigos," he said. "We are going to hike through the jungle. There is much water. You must put on the galoshes."

"How much water?" Zeus asked.

"You will not drown," the man said. "It is just a few inches of water."

"Drowning isn't the problem," Zeus said.

"Oh, yes, you must be Zeus. Forgive me. I have special boots for you." He brought out a pair of waders that would reach nearly to Zeus's chest.

Jaime walked down the aisle handing out boots, which we pulled on over our shoes. Then, following the man's directions, we grabbed our packs and hurried off the bus to the trees on the other side of the road.

Stepping under the cover of the forest canopy, the man pointed his flashlight under his chin, illuminating his face. "I am Jaime, your guide. I will go much of the way with you. As we walk through the jungle, keep your eyes peeled for animals."

"Paled?" Ostin asked, yawning.

"He meant 'peeled,'" I said. "What kind of animals?"

"The vipers, jaguar, and the anaconda. The big snakes like the water. I am told that some of you are more powerful than these things

—I do not doubt it. But your electricity will not save you from a viper strike, so please follow me. I was born in the jungle. I know its ways.”

He pointed the flashlight ahead of us, and we lined up behind him in single file. I brought up the rear with Zeus, who was moving cautiously. Jack and Abigail were in the front, behind Jaime, who had given Jack a machete to help widen the trail. McKenna walked in the middle of the group. She lit up her head to illuminate the path for us but stopped after a few seconds because of the millions of insects attracted to her light.

About five minutes into the hike Taylor asked, “What’s that sound?”

“Crickets?”

“No, it’s a buzzing sound. Like electricity.”

“It’s me,” I said. “I’m like a human bug zapper.”

We were walking under a canopy of leaves so thick that we might as well have been inside a building. Our group made for an interesting sight, our glow lightly illuminating the forest around us.

After twenty minutes or so, Jaime stopped for us to rest. We gathered in a small half circle. As Jaime looked at us he said, “*Incredible.*”

“What?” I asked.

“You, you . . .” He struggled with the word in English. Finally he said, “*Son fosforescentes.*”

“You glow,” Ostin said.

“I wish to show you something,” Jaime said. He pointed to a nearby tree with his flashlight. It was maybe twenty feet tall, slender, with narrow leaves.

Wade walked up to it with his hand outstretched. “This one?”

“Don’t touch it!” Jaime said.

Wade stopped.

“It is the tangarana tree. You will notice that there are no trees around it.”

“That’s kind of weird,” Jack said.

“I’ll show you why. Watch.” He tapped his machete against the tree’s trunk. Immediately a swarm of red-and-black ants covered the tree’s limbs. “The tangarana ant,” Jaime said. “They have a friendship.”

“A symbiotic relationship,” Ostin said. “The ant’s a symbiont. Like Dr. Hatch.”

The man glanced at him, then continued. “The ants protect the tree and the tree gives them shelter. The ants will attack animals who come too close. They will even kill any plant that tries to grow near it. The natives used to tie their enemies to the tree. The ants would eat them alive.”

“That’s horrible,” Abigail said.

Jaime shrugged. “War is horrible.”

He turned and we started walking again. A few minutes later there was a loud screech, which echoed around us.

“What the heck was that?” Ostin said, his eyes wide with panic. “It sounded like a pterodactyl.”

Jaime smiled. “That is the *mono aullador*—the howler monkey. It is loud, yes?”

Suddenly something swung from the darkness toward us. A bolt of lightning flashed across our heads, and the animal dropped to the ground.

“You electrocuted a monkey,” Ian said.

“I didn’t know what it was,” Zeus said. “It attacked us. It had it coming.”

“You shocked a cute, furry little monkey,” Abigail said.

“He’s not little,” Zeus said.

Jack laughed, and Zeus looked at him. “You going to give me grief too?”

Jack shook his head. “No, dude. I would have roundhouse kicked it back into the tree. You just got to it faster.”

The jungle was alive with noise, and the sound of rushing water became more pronounced the closer we got to the river. The trail started to decline, and once we reached the riverbank, the trail dropped steeply to a dark, slow-moving river. The river bubbled at its crests, illuminated by a half-moon’s glow.

Below us was a riverboat with a striped canvas top, the sides covered in plastic. A Peruvian man was sitting at the back of the boat, manning the engine.

“This boat is what the gold miners use,” Jaime said. “It will not cause suspicion in the night. But you must all stay quiet. We do not know who we will encounter on the river.”

“Do the Elgen patrol the river?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he said.

One by one we boarded the boat. Jack and Jaime helped everyone on, except Zeus, who stood alone on the top of the embankment looking down at the boat. “Really, man. I don’t do boats.”

“Quit being such a prima donna and get on the boat,” Jack said.

Jaime hiked back up to see what was keeping Zeus.

“I don’t do boats,” he said to Jaime. “I’ll take my chances on the road.”

“You have no chance on the road,” Jaime said.

“You don’t understand. If I fall in the water, it will electrocute me.” Zeus looked into Jaime’s eyes to make sure he understood the seriousness of his circumstance. “My electricity will *kill* me.”

Suddenly Jaime started laughing, softly at first, then louder, growing into a great, echoing chuckle.

Zeus’s eyes flashed with anger. “Shut up! Why are you laughing?”

“Amigo,” Jaime said, “I do not mean to disrespect, but look.” He held the flashlight out over the water near the bank, revealing several bright orange reflections, slightly oval like cat eyes. “You see, amigo? Many caiman. The river is full of caiman and piranha and anaconda. If you fall in the water you die anyway!”

Zeus looked at him for a moment, then said, “Oh.” He walked down the bank to the boat.

Taylor swallowed. “Caiman, piranhas, and anacondas?”

I just shrugged. “Come on. This is the easy part.”

Zeus carefully climbed over the bow, sitting at the opposite end from Jack and Abigail. I thought we all looked miserable and afraid. I remember once seeing a World War II picture of paratroopers sitting inside the fuselage of a plane waiting to jump, wondering if they would live to see the morning. I guess that’s how we felt.

Jaime unlashed the rope from the tree, then pushed us out from the shore while the other man revved up the outboard engine, pulling

us backward into the flow of the river. Taylor laid her head on my shoulder. No one had anything to say.



The journey up the river seemed like a strange dream. It took two men to operate the boat—Jaime, who lay across the bow watching for drifting logs, and Luis, who sat back at the engine, quietly watching over us. Both banks of the river were walls of trees, creating a narrow, overgrown corridor that stretched for hundreds of miles through rain forest until reaching into the heart of the massive Amazon itself. There were occasional breaks in the trees, revealing small clearings for huts or illicit mining camps.

The boat's long benches were covered with dark vinyl pads and the ten of us stretched out on them, overlapping our heads and feet. The inside of the boat was lit with a warm, green luminance from our glow. I looked around at my friends. McKenna, Wade, and Abigail were asleep. Jack was awake, sitting near the engine, opening and shutting a pocketknife. Ian was leaning over the side watching the water. Ostin, who was lying near Taylor, was still trying to get comfortable. When he turned to his side I saw something move across his back—a hairy tarantula about the size of my hand.

"Ostin," I whispered.

"What?"

"Don't move."

His eyes widened. "There's something on me, isn't there?"

"Don't move. I'll get it."

"There's a massive, hairy spider on your back," Taylor said.

"You didn't have to tell me," Ostin said.

"I'll get it," I said. I pulsed as I grabbed the tarantula. There was a loud snap, followed by a wisp of gray smoke. I threw the spider over the side of the boat into the dark water.

"Spiders," Ostin said. "I hate spiders." He shuddered, then lay back down.

I slid to the front of the boat near Jaime. "How did you get involved with us?" I asked.

He leaned back a little. "Let's just say I do not like the Elgen. They come to my city and they change everything. We live in fear now. Their guards walk our streets. They have all the power. If they want something you have, they take it. There is nothing you can do. Even our policemen fear them. We know danger. The jungle is dangerous. It will take your life, even your family. But it is fair. It only takes from those who do not respect it. The Elgen take what they want."

"Did the Elgen take something of yours?" I asked.

Jaime slowly nodded, his eyes dark with gravity. "They took my son."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there. The Elgen need no reason."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Me too," he said softly. "I am very sorry I was not there to protect my son. I was working for the Elgen. It was my right to die before my son." Jaime looked at me with a deep sadness. "I must tell you something I learned as a boy." He looked around. "We are jungle people. From my boyhood I was taught its ways. My father taught me the vines and roots that will save your life from a viper bite. And he warned me never to go into the jungle without a machete. There are many dangerous animals in the jungle. In the water, the electric eel, the caiman, and piranha. On the land, there are the vipers and the jaguar and puma. But the most dangerous lives both on land and water, it is the anaconda. They grow ten meters and longer, yet they are fast. Even the caiman and jaguar fear the grown anaconda."

“One day my father taught me this lesson. He said, ‘Jaime, if you are ever in the jungle without your machete and you are to meet an anaconda, do not run, it will catch you and eat you. This is what you are to do. First, you must look directly at the snake. It is frightening, but you must look at it. It will freeze like a tiger does as it stalks its prey. While it is frozen, you must slowly move yourself, very, very slowly, to where the sun is directly above your head. The jungle is on the equator, so the sun is often high in the sky. The snake will not want to lose its dinner, so it will keep following you, slightly turning. But the snake does not have eyelids, so as it looks up at you it is also looking into the sun and it will burn out its eyes. When its eyes are white with blindness, you may just walk away.’”

I looked at him for a moment, then said, “You’re not just talking about snakes, are you?”

He shook his head. “No. I have not met the one they call Hatch. But I think he may be like this snake. If he wants you too much, that may be his weakness.”

“I hope that’s not his only weakness,” I said softly. I exhaled slowly. “I better try to get some sleep.”

“Yes,” said Jaime.

I lay back on the bench next to Taylor. But I couldn’t sleep. After a while I sat up, looking out over the dark, moving landscape.

It was maybe an hour later when Ian whispered, “Michael, look.” He was pointing toward the riverbank.

“I don’t see anything,” I whispered.

“Look carefully.”

As my eyes focused I saw the silhouette of a man standing on the bank looking at us.

“I see him. Is he . . . Elgen?”

“No,” Ian said. “He’s dressed like some kind of tribesman.”

“He is of the Amacarra tribe,” Jaime said. He had walked over to see what Ian was pointing at.

“Amacarra?” I said.

“Yes. The Amazon once had many such tribes—more than ten million people. But now there are few left in the forest. The shamans

and medicine men are growing old. The ancient knowledge of the Amazon and her healing will soon be lost.”

“Are they dangerous?” Ian asked.

“Not as dangerous as some of you, perhaps. But they have blow darts tipped in the poison of the blow-dart frog—very, very dangerous.”

“*Dendrobates leucomelas*,” Ostin said in his sleep. “The poison dart frog, indigenous to South America. A frog the size of my fingernail has enough venom to kill ten full-grown men.” Then he smacked his lips and was quiet again.

I looked at Ian, and we both shook our heads in wonder.

“The Amacarra have something in common with us,” Jaime said.

“What’s that?”

“They hate the Elgen. They call them ‘*bai mwo gwei*.’ The white devil.”

We watched the man fade into the inky blackness of the forest as our boat slowly slipped past.

“He is a holy man,” Jaime said. “Once when I was fishing, my boat engine had problems, and I paddled my boat to the shore. The holy man was standing there at the bank. I told him I was having problems with my boat. He said, ‘Yes, last night the Great Spirit told me to wait here for you.’ Then he blessed my boat, and the engine started. I made it all the way home.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. “Now sleep,” Jaime said, and went back to the bow.

* * *

As badly as I needed sleep, I couldn’t find it. I lay quietly, listening to the steady sound of the boat’s whining chug.

As dawn came, Jaime left his post at the front of the boat to talk to me. “Señor Michael. You are not sleeping?”

“No. I can’t.”

“Too much on your mind, I think.”

“Probably.”

“You are a very brave young man.”

“No,” I said. “I’m very afraid.”

“You cannot be brave without fear.” He sat back. “Luis at the engine is mourning. Last summer his son was in this river playing with his friends when he vanished. A caiman pulled him under. Or perhaps an anaconda. Luis was on the bank. He jumped in the river to save his son. But it was too late. His son was already gone.”

I sat up and looked at Luis. No wonder he was so quiet. “That was very dangerous for him to jump in after his son,” I said.

“Yes, but he did not think of the danger to himself because he loves his son.”

I nodded.

“You and Luis have much in common. You also jump in the water with the Elgen caiman. You too are brave.” He slapped his chest. “But more than brave, you have love. And love is brave.” He patted me on the shoulder, then went back up to the front of the boat.

About a half hour later the engine cut back, and Luis shook Jack to wake him. He then pointed at the dirty, oil-stained blankets Jack was lying on. Jack handed the blankets to Luis, who began wrapping them around the outboard motor. Everyone but Wade and McKenna awoke.

“What’s going on?” I asked Jaime.

“Luis is quieting the motor. Just ahead is the beginning of the Elgen compound. Their land comes close to the river here.”

I peered up over the side of the boat. Through the trees I could see the light of a clearing in the forest and the glistening of a metal fence.

“How big is the compound?”

“Ten thousand hectares,” he said. “It will take you an hour to hike to the compound, if that’s the route you take. But I don’t think that will be possible. There are cameras everywhere.”

“The Elgen love cameras as much as I love Oreos,” Ostin said, sitting up.

“It would be like walking three miles in front of their faces and them not seeing you. It is impossible.”

“Then how do we get in?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I do not know. But I am instructed to give you this.” He handed me a bulky envelope, which I quickly opened. Inside

were several documents, a satellite map, and a letter. I extracted the letter and began to read it out loud.

Michael,

If you are reading this letter you are already near your destination. Through satellite surveillance we have gathered some information about the Elgen compound that may be of help to you. The Elgen compound is built in the center of a twenty-five thousand acre ranch surrounded by two high-voltage electric fences. The fence may not be a problem for you, but it will be for some of the other Electroclan members. How you get into the facility will be up to you. It won't be easy. Crossing the ranch will be difficult, if not impossible, as there are hundreds of surveillance cameras, some visible and some not, and nowhere to hide. You will be utterly exposed. There is only one entrance into the compound, the main road, and it is heavily guarded and entered only at the checkpoint. All vehicles are searched by dogs, even the Elgen vehicles. Again, it is up to you to find a way into the compound.

The facility consists of four main buildings and a power transformer. This is the largest of the Starxource plants. We know that your primary goal is to find your mother, but if you can knock out the compound's grid you will do great damage to the Elgen's credibility as you will shut down all power in a two-hundred-mile radius and affect the major cities of Lima and Arequipa. After you leave the compound, we have made transportation arrangements for you. Enclosed in this package is a transmitting and global positioning device.

I reached into the envelope and pulled out what I thought was the device but turned out to be only an iPod nano.

"It looks like an iPod," Taylor said.

"That's definitely an iPod," Ostin said. "Maybe they rewired it into a GPS."

“Keep reading,” Taylor said.

For your and our safety the GPS device has been hidden inside an iPod nano.

“Told you,” Ostin said.

“Shh,” Taylor said.

To use the GPS go to the Colby Cross album and click on the song “I’m Lost Without You.” A map of the area will appear, leading you to us. When you have reached your destination you can use the device to signal us. Again, go to the Colby Cross album and click on the song “Come and Get Me, Baby.” As the song plays it will send us a signal, and we will dispatch a helicopter to pick you up at the location we installed on your GPS, a clearing in the jungle about ten miles east of the compound. We’re sorry it cannot be closer, but once you’ve attacked the base, nowhere in the vicinity will be safe. Traveling through the jungle will not be easy, but the Elgen will have difficulty following you.

We have just received some unfortunate news. We have learned that Dr. Hatch is now at the Peruvian compound. For reasons unknown to us, he has summoned all of the Elgen guards from around the world. We believe there will be more than two thousand guards on the premises. Had we known this earlier we would have postponed your arrival. If you wish to delay, it’s your call. Tell Jaime and he will continue to drive you up the river to our rendezvous.

Good luck.

“Hatch is there,” I said.

“Good,” Jack said, making a fist. “I have a present for him.”

I looked over at Taylor. “What do you think?”

“Not good,” she said softly. “Two thousand guards?”

“That’s an army,” I said. “Maybe we should delay.” I looked at Ostin. “What do you think?”

Ostin thought for a moment, then said, "Where's the best place to hide a penny?"

"Really?" Taylor said. "We're about to face our deaths and you're telling riddles?"

"I'm making a point," Ostin said indignantly. "The best place to hide a penny *is in a jar of pennies.*"

Taylor just looked at him.

"Think about it. The more people there are, the easier it is to blend in. The huge influx of guards might be creating the very distraction we need. Besides, if it comes down to a gunfight, what does it matter if there's fifty guards or two thousand? Either way we're dead."

"Wow, I feel so much better now," Taylor said.

"He might be right, though," I said. "What do you all think? Do we go?"

"Your call," Jack said. "I'm game either way."

"Zeus?"

He looked nervous but said, "Whatever you decide."

I turned to Taylor, who was still looking anxious. "What do you think?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "It's up to you."

I put my head in my hands. "Why does everyone keep saying that? I have no idea what the right thing is."

Jack said, "Look, you got instincts. You rescued us from the academy, didn't you? You didn't know what you were doing then, either."

I sighed. "Okay, I think Ostin's right. If we can figure out how to get inside the place, I say we do it. As far as taking out the power station, I wouldn't know how to do that if I were alone in the building with a ton of dynamite. I say we find my mother, then get out of there."

For the next half hour Ostin and I carefully studied the map of the compound, trying to get an idea of where we were. About the time the sun rose above the tree line, Luis cut back the boat's motor and we began moving closer to shore.

"Señor Michael," Jaime said. "We are close. You should all eat before we dock."

“Ostin,” I said. “Wake Wade and the girls.”

“No problem,” he said.

* * *

Jaime had brought bananas, tamales wrapped in corn husks, and a pastry that looked a little like something my mother used to make called a tiger roll.

“*Pionono de manjarblanco*,” Jaime said as he handed it to me in a pan. “It is filled with *dulce de leche*.”

I knew only a few words in Spanish, *leche* being one of them. “Milk?”

“Sweet milk,” Ostin said. “Caramel.”

I took a bite. It was airy and good. “*Bueno*,” I said.

“Eat many,” Jaime said. “Eat many.”

“Everyone eat a lot of bananas,” Zeus said. “We need to be at our best.”

“Hand me a couple,” Ostin said.

“Not you,” he said. “The electric ones.”

“I do have electric powers. The brain . . .”

“We know, Ostin,” Taylor said. “A hundred gazillion electric synapses-thingies.” She smiled at Zeus. “He won’t give up.”

“Here is something to drink,” Jaime said. He opened a cooler filled with cartons of milk and bottles of Inca Kola. I took one of each, popping the cap off the bottle with the bottle opener Jaime handed me. The Kola tasted a lot like bubble gum.

“What’s with tamales for breakfast?” Taylor asked.

“It’s Peru,” I said.

The tamales were stuffed with eggs, cheese, and shredded chicken.

“Think we can heat these?” Ostin asked, peeling back the husk.

“Sure,” Taylor said. “We’ll just throw them in the microwave.”

McKenna reached over and took the tamale from Ostin, holding it gently in her hands. Within a few seconds steam began to rise from between her fingers. She handed the tamale back to Ostin. “Careful, it’s hot.”

Ostin stared at her with bright eyes. "I'm so going to marry you someday."

She smiled as she sat back.

A half hour later Jaime and Luis began arguing. Jaime was pointing ahead toward the bank and Luis was shaking his head. "*No aquí.*"

"*Sí, aquí,*" Jaime said.

Finally Luis relented, steering the boat closer to the bank.

"Ian," I said. "I think we're about to dock. Do you see anything up ahead?"

He looked toward the bank and shook his head. "Nothing but jungle."

Luis guided the boat into a small inlet that was overhung with thick canopy, and again we were obscured in shadow. Jaime climbed out onto the bow as Luis ran the boat up onto the shore, startling several small caimans and sending them scurrying back into the water. Jaime jumped out onto dry ground with a coil of rope. He pulled the boat farther up onto the bank and lashed the end of the rope around the trunk of a peculiarly shaped tree. "Amigos, hurry," he said.

We grabbed our packs and one by one climbed out of the boat. Ostin and I were the last out. As I was stepping down Jaime put his arm on my shoulder, stopping me. "Señor, do you have your device?"

I held up the packet. "It's in here."

"I'm sorry, you cannot take the packet."

"What?"

"It is too dangerous. If the Elgen find it they will know we are helping you. Do you remember the instructions for the device?"

"Colby Cross. Yes. Can I at least take the map?"

"No, señor."

"It's okay," Ostin said, tapping his temple. "I've got it all right here."

I took the iPod out of the envelope and handed the rest back to Jaime. He unlashed the boat.

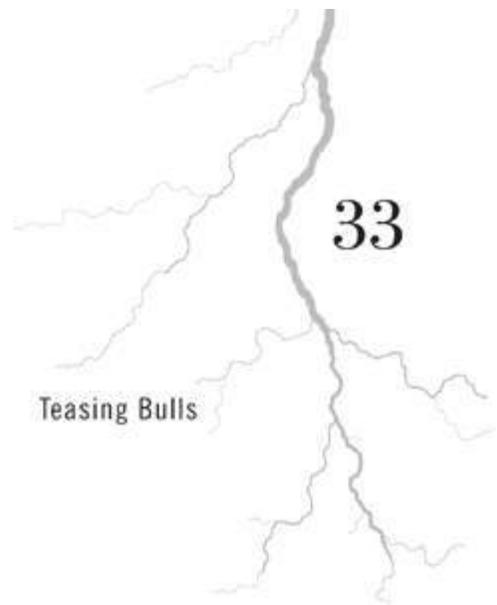
"*Dios esté contigo,*" he said.

"God be with you," Ostin translated.

"*Gracias,*" I replied.

Jaime pushed the boat off the bank, jumping into it in one fluid motion. He gave us a salute, then the boat pulled back out into the

river, reversed direction, and sped back the way we had come.



How far is it to the compound?" Wade asked.

"I think it's about the same distance as our hike to the boat," I said. "Everyone ready?"

Everyone looked tired and anxious, but they all nodded.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go."

Jack held up his machete. "I'll take the lead."

We all followed him back into the jungle. Insects continued to flare off my skin in bright blue flashes. Ten minutes into our hike Jack stopped.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Look."

A jaguar was standing in our path, about fifty feet ahead of us, its green eyes pale in the distance.

"Zeus," I said. Zeus quickly stepped up. "We might need you. Just in case it decides to hunt one of us."

"Nobody run," Ostin said. "We should be okay."

"Why are we okay?" Taylor asked.

"We don't look like what they usually eat. But if you run, it triggers the chase instinct."

"Good to know," Wade said.

The cat looked more bored than hungry. After a few minutes it turned away and lumbered off into the thick foliage.

We breathed a collective sigh of relief, then continued hiking.

Ostin said to Taylor, "I hope we don't have to deal with those rats. I hate rats. Even without electricity they're bad."

Taylor sighed. "You're going to tell me everything you know about rats, aren't you?"

"Rats," Ostin said, "are the most successful survivor of any mammal on earth. They can live almost three weeks without sleep, keep themselves afloat in water for three days, and fall fifty feet without getting hurt. That's the equivalent of us falling off a twenty-six-story building.

"They're also breeding machines. In ideal conditions a single pair of rats could produce, in three years, three and a half million offspring. That's why nearly ninety percent of the world's islands have been overrun by rats. They cause about half the extinctions of reptile and bird species."

"You're not making this any easier," Taylor said.

"Did you know that rats are ticklish and actually giggle?"

"No."

"And they have belly buttons but no thumbs?"

"Why would I want to know that?"

"Did you know that a group of rats is called a mischief?"

"No. Really?"

"Did you know that rats regulate their temperatures through their tails because they can't sweat?"

"Nope. Didn't know that either."

"Did you know that there's a temple in India where rats are worshipped?"

"No," Taylor said. "Maybe you should go there."

"Did you know that rats can't vomit?"

"Okay, enough. No more rat trivia."

"I'm just passing time."

"Then talk about something besides rats."

Ostin thought about it. "How about snakes? These jungles are slithering with them."

“Michael, your turn,” Taylor said, pulling me next to Ostin.

We hiked another forty minutes before we saw light ahead of us—the edge of the forest. I stopped everyone. “All right, everyone, stay alert.”

We cautiously approached the forest perimeter. The Elgen fence was only thirty feet from the clearing, and we could see dozens of bulls on the other side. The fence was about twenty feet high with horizontal wires eighteen inches apart. The fence was marked with DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE signs in both English and Spanish.

“It looks like a ranch,” McKenna said.

“It *is* a ranch,” I said. “Ostin, how far do you think we are from the gate?”

“It’s about three miles southwest.”

I stared ahead at the animals. “Can you see the compound?” I asked Ian.

“Barely. There’s a lot of electrical interference. There are also a lot of security cameras between here and the compound.”

“A lot?”

“More than a hundred.”

I shook my head. “The Elgen and their cameras.”

“What now?” Taylor asked. “How do we get in?”

“I think I could lift the wires high enough that everyone could climb under, but then what do we do?” I asked. “With all those cameras, we’d be surrounded by Elgen guards before we got within two miles of the place.”

Zeus said, “Ian could spot the cameras and I could blow them out.”

“Yeah, like they’re not going to notice that?” Jack said snidely.

“Shut up,” Zeus said. “I don’t hear you coming up with anything.”

“C’mon, guys,” Ian said. “Quit fighting all the time.”

“Maybe if he’d quit being such a jerk,” Zeus said.

“You watch your back,” Jack said.

“Is that a threat?” Zeus asked.

“Please, stop it,” I said. “We’ve got enough to worry about.” I sat down to think.

“We need them to come get us,” Ostin said.

“Sure,” Wade said. “Why don’t we just call them and ask for a ride.”

“Ostin, tell us your idea,” I said.

“If we can somehow damage the fence, they’ll have to send out a repair crew. While they’re trying to repair the gate we’ll jump them, take their uniforms and vehicle, and drive to the compound.”

“How do we damage the fence?” Taylor asked.

McKenna was looking at the top of the fence. “We could drop a tree branch on it,” she said.

“Brilliant,” Ostin said. “We find a tree that hangs over the fence, then one of us climbs up with a machete and hacks a branch off so it falls on the fence.”

“I could do that,” Jack said.

“It’s worth a shot,” I said. “Let’s find ourselves a branch.”

We walked about a half mile along the fence line concealed in the shadow of the jungle until we found a tree with a large branch that hung over the fence. The branch provided enough shade that six large bulls were grazing beneath it.

Jack shimmied about forty feet up the tree, his machete slung through the back of his belt. He climbed out on the overhanging branch, then, straddling it, began hacking away.

“Be careful up there,” Abigail said.

Jack smiled and pounded harder.

“That’s a really big branch,” Ostin said.

“It will have to be big to damage that wire,” I said.

“Yeah. I’m just saying, it looks really heavy. I just hope when it breaks off, the tree doesn’t flip back and catapult Jack through the jungle.”

“We should be so lucky,” Zeus said.

It took Jack almost fifteen minutes to hack through the branch, and he was soaked with sweat. With each slash of the machete he rained down perspiration.

When the branch began to crack Jack shouted, “Watch out. Here it goes.” He gave the branch a few more whacks, then jumped onto another tree limb as the branch fell out from under him, directly onto the fence. Sparks shot out in a bright cascade but the branch just flipped off the top wire, doing no damage. We stood there speechless.

“Crap,” Ostin said.

I looked up at Jack. He was shaking his head. "That fence is a lot stronger than it looks."

"And it looks pretty strong," Taylor said. "Any other ideas?"

"Watch out," Jack shouted. He let the machete fall. It stuck blade first into the marshy ground about ten feet from Ostin, who wasn't paying attention and jumped when it hit. Then Jack slid down the tree's trunk and joined us. "Didn't work," he said.

"You need a shower, dude," Zeus said.

Jack wiped his forehead. "Yeah, I'm starting to smell like you."

The two glared at each other.

"What we need," Ostin said, "is a car to drive through the fence."

I looked over at the fence and the bulls behind it. "How much does a car weigh?"

"That depends," Ostin said. "Are you talking about a Volkswagen or a six-wheeler?"

"Something big enough to break through that fence."

"A ton should do," Jack said.

Ostin nodded in agreement. "That's about right."

"How much do you think one of those bulls weighs?" I asked.

Ostin smiled. "A ton. At least. The problem is, how do you get a bull to charge an electric fence?"

"Easy," Wade said.

We all looked at him.

"Oh yeah, my uncle had bulls on his farm. Those things are crazy. I've seen videos of them charging a train head-on. You just have to get them mad enough."

"How do you do that?" Taylor asked.

"Call them names," Ostin said.

Everyone looked at him.

"You're kidding, right?" Taylor said.

Ostin blushed. "Yeah, of course."

"Actually, it's easy," Wade said. "Those things are born mean. You just have to throw things at them. It always worked for us. Once we were throwing apples at them and one of my uncle's bulls got so mad it broke through the fence. He had us up a tree for almost an hour."

"Let's try it," I said.

We all went into the jungle looking for things to throw. McKenna found some softball-size seed pods on the ground. We loaded up with them, then picked out the largest of the bulls and started throwing things at him. We managed to pelt him a few times—I even knocked him once in the head—but he was pretty tranquil as far as bulls go. He didn't even look at us.

Finally Zeus got impatient. "I'll do it," he said. He walked up to the fence and began waving and shouting at the bull. "Hey, want a piece of me? Come and get me, you ugly cow." The bull looked at him, then suddenly began hoofing the dirt, like it was preparing to charge.

"I told you they don't like to be called names," Ostin said.

Then Zeus stuck out his hand and shot a bolt of lightning at the bull. The bull stiffened, then fell to its side, rolling all the way to its back, then onto its side again, its legs sticking straight out the whole time.

"I think you killed it," Ostin said.

"Way to go, genius," Jack said.

Suddenly the bull climbed to its feet and charged at us.

"Run!" I shouted.

The bull hit the fence with the force of a car crash. There was an electric snap, like the sound of a moth on a bug zapper, except a hundred times louder. The bull didn't break through the wire, but had lodged itself halfway through the fence, and sparks continued to fly all around it. Suddenly the sparks stopped. I looked at the top of the fence. The orange flashing lights affixed to the posts had gone dim.

"He shorted out the fence," Ostin said.

I walked over and touched the fence to make sure the power was really out. It was.

"Perfect," I said. "They'll have to come out to free the bull."

"Which will take at least a half dozen men," Ostin said.

"All right!" I shouted. "Everyone back to the jungle!"

As everyone walked back, Ostin grinned at me.

"What?"

"I don't know," he said. "That 'everyone back to the jungle' just sounded kind of funny."

"Glad you liked it."

“I’m going to use that sometime.”



It didn't take long for the Elgen to respond to the damaged fence. Less than ten minutes had passed when Ian said, "Here they come."

"The guards?"

"No. They look like ranchers or something. They're driving the fence looking for the problem."

"How many are there?" I asked.

"They've got two trucks. Three in each of them."

"Any guards?"

"Doesn't look like it. At least not in uniform."

"This is perfect," Ostin said. "They'll have to get close to the fence to free the bull."

"And while they're freeing the bull, we'll take them down," I said. "Then we'll take their clothes and trucks."

"We should tie them to one of those tangarana trees," Wade said.

Abigail looked at him. "What a horrible thing to say."

"What were you thinking, man?" Jack said, glancing at Abigail.

Wade flushed with embarrassment. "I was just joking. C'mon, can't you guys take a joke?"

* * *

The Elgen ranch trucks were larger than regular pickup trucks. And quieter. They looked like a cross between a pickup and a Sno-Cat, without the tank treads.

“They’re electric of course,” Ostin said, before I asked.

The first truck stopped just a few yards from the struggling bull. The men, all of them Peruvian and wearing boots, jeans, and white rancher shirts, got out of the truck and walked around the animal, trying to decide what to do with it.

They talked for about five minutes, then one of them went back to his truck and retrieved a rifle. He pointed it at the bull’s head and fired. When the animal had stopped moving, the men took rope from the truck and tied the bull’s legs together. Then they let out the wire from the truck’s winch, wrapped it around the bull’s torso, and began pulling it from the fence.

As the animal was being dragged to the truck, one of the men pointed to the branch that Jack had cut. All but two of them walked over to examine it. One of the men crouched down, running his finger over the machete marks. He began speaking excitedly. They looked up to where the branch was cut from, then in our direction. One of them pointed directly to where we were hiding.

“They’re on to us,” Jack whispered. “We’ve got to attack.”

“We’ve got to get them closer to the fence,” I said. “That guy’s still holding his gun. Ostin, any ideas?”

Before he could answer, Abigail stood. “I’ve got one.”

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Get down!” Jack said. They’ll see you.”

“I’m counting on it,” she said, stepping from the shade of the canopy. “I’m betting they won’t be expecting a blond American girl to come walking out of the jungle.”

Abigail began sauntering toward the fence with a big smile.

“Zeus,” I said. “Be ready to hit the guy with the gun.”

“I’ll try,” he said. “But he’s pretty far.”

“*Hola, amigos!*” Abigail shouted.

The men all stopped what they were doing and stared.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I’m lost. I’m looking for the beach.”

The men looked at one another in amazement. One of them translated, then they all started to laugh.

“Hello, how do you do?” said one in broken English. He started walking toward the fence. The rest followed.

“Pretty girl,” another said. “Come close.”

“*Es un ángel?*” one man said. “*De dónde vino?*”

“They think she’s an angel,” Ostin said.

“Taylor, now,” I whispered.

Taylor concentrated, and the men suddenly stopped talking. Some of them looked around as if they were confused; two fell to their knees, their hands on their heads.

“Now!” I shouted.

Jack, Zeus, Wade, and I sprang from the bushes. Zeus began firing, first hitting the man with the rifle, then knocking three others to the ground. I knocked out the two on their knees with lightning balls.

I tested the fence to make sure it was still dead, then all four of us climbed through the wire. Wade and Jack grabbed the man closest to the fence and dragged him over to Ian.

“Grab that guy’s rope,” Ian said. “And his knife.”

“Got it,” Wade said. He took the man’s bowie knife from its sheath, then grabbed his coil of rope and threw it through the fence. “Here’s the knife to cut it,” he said, handing it to Ian.

McKenna began stretching the rope in long, straight pieces. “How long?”

“About five-foot lengths,” Ian said. “Here’s the knife.”

“Don’t need it,” McKenna said, her hand burning red. She easily melted through the nylon rope.

Zeus, Wade, and I worked together dragging the men over to the fence within reach of Ian and the girls.

“I’ll check the truck for weapons,” Jack said, running toward the first truck. He returned holding two cans in the air. “Check this out. Bull mace.”

We carried the men into the jungle, where we removed their rancher uniforms, leaving them in their underwear. Suddenly one of the men jumped up and ran.

Zeus shot at him but was too late, as the man was already in the trees.

“Get him!” I shouted. Jack and Zeus ran into the jungle after him.

We finished tying the rest of the men, then I said, “Ian, we better go help them. McKenna, you better come too. We’ll need some light.” I looked at Taylor. “Can you guys make sure they don’t get away?”

“They’re not going anywhere,” Taylor said.

Wade held up one of the cans of bull mace. “I guarantee they’re going nowhere.”

* * *

Ian, McKenna, and I ran into the jungle in the direction Zeus and Jack had taken in pursuit. Even in the middle of day the jungle was dark enough that a person could hide, at least until McKenna lit up, illuminating everything around her like a great torch. After a few minutes of running we heard shouting in the distance.

“They’re over there,” Ian said.

When we caught up with them, the rancher was lying facedown on the ground between Jack and Zeus; Jack was pointing a can of mace at Zeus, and Zeus had his arms outstretched toward Jack, electricity arcing between his fingers.

“Stop it!” I shouted. They both turned to me. “What’s going on?”

“Lightning stink shocked me,” Jack said.

“It was an accident,” Zeus said. “He was standing next to the dude.”

“I *had* the dude pinned down, you stinking—”

“You say ‘stink’ one more time and I’m going to fry you—”

“Stop it!” I shouted again. “Are you guys crazy? We’re about to walk into a camp of two thousand Elgen soldiers who want to kill us and you’re fighting with each other?”

They both lowered their hands.

“If we can’t do this together, we don’t stand a chance. You two have got to stop fighting.”

After a moment, Jack sighed. “All right. You’re right.” He put out his hand.

Zeus just looked at Jack angrily.

“I’m not offering it again,” Jack said.

Zeus turned away. “It was an accident.”

“Whatever you say, bro,” Jack said. “Whatever you say.”

“You guys have got to solve this. If we’re not together, we’re dead.” I lowered my head, fighting my despair. “We’re probably dead anyway. But if we’re going down in flames, it’s not going to be because we made it happen.” I looked at the man on the ground. “Come on, we need to bring him back with the others.”

“I got him,” Jack said. He knelt down and lifted the man over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry, and the five of us walked back to the fence in silence.

As the others came into view, Ostin shouted, “Good work, dudes. You got him.”

No one answered him.

“What happened?” he asked McKenna.

“Don’t ask,” she said.

“What’s wrong, Michael?” Ostin asked. “You’ll feel better if—”

I held up my hands. “Just . . . stop. I don’t want to talk about it. And I don’t need you analyzing me right now.”

Ostin stepped back. “Sorry.” He glanced at McKenna in embarrassment, then walked away.

Taylor just stared at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh yeah, I’m doing great,” I said sarcastically. “My mother’s being held captive by a sociopath, we’re hopelessly outnumbered, and our friends are turning on each other while I lead them to certain death.”

Taylor looked at me for a moment, then asked softly, “Do you really believe that?”

I suddenly realized that everyone was looking at me. I swallowed, embarrassed at my outburst. “I don’t know what I believe.”

Taylor took my hand. “Come here.” She led me deep enough into the jungle that we were away from everyone else. When she looked at me her eyes were filled with tears. “You can’t give up now. We’re all here because we believe in you. If you really believe this is hopeless, we might as well turn ourselves over to Hatch right now.”

“I didn’t mean to say that,” I said.

Her expression didn’t change. “Michael, I’m terrified. Six months ago the most frightening thing I had ever done was try out for cheerleading in front of the student body.

“I need you to believe, Michael. Because I’m holding on by a thread—and you’re that thread. If I don’t have you to hold on to, I don’t have anything. None of us do. I know it’s not fair putting that much pressure on you, but it’s the way it is.”

“I didn’t ask any of you to come,” I said defensively.

“I know. But we’re here. And we came because we believe in you. And because we care about you.”

I looked down for a moment, then rubbed my eyes. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m terrified too.”

“I know.” She hugged me. After a minute she leaned back and said, “I’ve never told anyone this before, not even my best friend Maddie. I used to get severe panic attacks before I tried out for cheer. My first year, on the morning of the final cut, I pretended to be sick so I didn’t have to go to school. My dad said to me, ‘Are you afraid?’ I said no but he knew I was lying. He said, ‘Let me give you some advice. As long as you remember the whys, the hows will take care of themselves.’” Taylor looked into my eyes. “Your mom is a pretty big why. We believe in you because we believe you’re doing the right thing. So let me ask you again . . . Do you believe that we can do this?”

“You’re holding my hand,” I said. “You already know.”

“I want to hear you say it.”

I straightened up. “I believe in what I have to do. That’s what matters. My mother always said that if you do the right thing, the universe comes to your aid, and look what’s happened so far: we escaped two Elgen traps, we found my mother, we got to Peru, and now we have a truck and a way into Hatch’s stronghold. It’s too big of a coincidence. I don’t believe that whatever brought us this far brought us to fail.”

Taylor smiled. “That’s what I needed to hear. I’ll follow you wherever you go and slap Hatch in the face if you tell me to. Now you need to let everyone else know.”

I took her hand. "Come on."

We walked back to the group. The ranchers were all awake, lying on their stomachs with their hands bound behind their backs. Sadly, the Electroclan looked about as subdued as the ranchers did, their shoulders slumped in despair. Every eye was on us.

"I need to say something," I said, walking in front of the group. I looked at them all, then slowly started. "First, I'm sorry, Ostin. I shouldn't have gone off on you like that."

"It's okay, buddy," he said.

"It's not, but thank you. Second, I believe with all my heart that we're going to rescue my mom and get out of here. I'm sorry I was so negative. You've put your faith in me, and I should have been stronger."

Everyone was quiet for a moment, then Zeus said, "No, it's not your fault. We've been acting like jerks. Especially me." He looked at Jack, then stood and walked over to him.

"I'm sorry," Zeus said. "I really didn't try to shock you, but I didn't try not to either. You were right to be angry. I know you said you wouldn't offer your hand again, so let me do it." He put his hand out.

Jack looked at Zeus's hand for a moment, then he took it. "Forgotten. *Semper Fi.*"

Zeus nodded. "*Semper Fi.*"

Taylor squeezed my hand.

I continued. "Third, it's time to do what we came here for. We're going to take the trucks right into the compound. Ian, I need you to stay next to me and tell us what you see as we get closer. Look for others dressed like us, and we'll head for their building. I'm hoping they might have a separate ranch entrance."

"Why don't we just ask them?" Ostin said.

"They're not going to tell us the truth," Zeus said.

"Maybe not with their mouths, but Taylor can read their thoughts."

"Except I don't speak Spanish," she said.

"I'll ask yes-or-no questions," Ostin said.

"Good idea," I said. "Is everyone ready?"

"Let's go, team!" Taylor shouted, sounding a lot like a cheerleader. In spite of the gravity of our situation I had to smile. "Sorry," she said,

blushing. "Habit."

We put on the ranchers' uniforms. There were only six of them, so Abigail, Taylor, and McKenna didn't wear them. The men weren't big people, so the uniforms fit us fairly well, except for Jack, whose pants legs fell above his ankles.

"How do I look?" I asked Taylor.

"Like an Elgen ranch hand," she replied.

"Great. Now let's get some information." I looked at the men, on their stomachs. "Who should we talk to?"

"*Hombres*," Ostin said. The men looked up. "Show them a little electricity, Michael."

I held my hand up, separated my fingers, and pulsed until electricity arced between my fingers.

"Let's talk to that one," Taylor said, pointing to a young man with fearful eyes. We walked over to him. He didn't look much older than us, and his back was marked with long, thick scars, as if he'd been severely whipped. The three of us dragged him away from the others, laying him in a small clearing near a termite nest.

"No!" he pleaded. "*Por favor!*"

"He thinks we're going to hurt him," I said. "Ostin, tell him we won't hurt him."

"You really want to tell him that?" Taylor said.

"You're right, he doesn't need to know that." I turned back to Ostin. "Tell him we won't hurt him if he cooperates."

Ostin relayed the message in Spanish.

While Taylor and Ostin interrogated the man, I sat down with Ian and showed him the photograph I'd taken from our apartment. "That's my mother."

"She's beautiful," he said.

"Can you remember what she looks like? She's probably not going to look exactly the same after all she's been through."

Ian put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry. If she's in there, I'll find her."

A few minutes later Ostin and Taylor returned to the group.

"Here's the four-one-one on the Peruvian dude," Ostin said. "His name is Raúl. His family is from Puerto Maldonado, and he was

forced to work for the Elgen after they took his family's land. He says it's the same for all the ranchers."

Taylor nodded. "It's true. Those scars on his back are from the guards. The Elgen lost some cattle to a jaguar, so the guards whipped him as an example to the other ranchers. He says the Elgen treat them like dogs."

"Sounds like the Elgen," I said.

"He says that he can help us," Ostin said. "The compound has a double electric fence around the entire property, with guard nests on each corner. Close to the compound the fence is narrower, so you can't crawl through it like you can here. There is one main road with a checkpoint that everyone has to go through, except for the ranchers. The ranchers have their own gate on the southeast side of the compound near the building they call the 'bowl.' That's where they bring the cattle in to be slaughtered.

"He says there are guards above the wire but they don't pay much attention to the ranchers, and he knows this because some of the ranchers sneak their wives in. There's only one guard on the ground, but he's not always there and he's sleeping half the time. We can get into the bowl through the ranchers' entrance or the cattle entrance. From the bowl we can walk right into the compound."

"Won't we be seen?"

"He said there will be ranchers around and since we're foreigners they'll be aware of us, but he doubts they'll sound an alarm. The Elgen have a lot of foreigners come through their area—especially lately."

"Why lately?" I asked.

"He told us that the one they call *el doctor* is holding a big conference with all the guards."

"*El doctor*?" I asked.

"I think he means Hatch," Ostin said.

"Just like they warned us in the letter," I said.

"They've had to work extra hours to bring meat in for the kitchen, so he says the camp is in complete chaos right now. Our timing is perfect."

"Perfect or perfectly awful?" Taylor said.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“What about the ranchers?” Taylor asked. “We can’t just leave them here. It’s the jungle. Something will, like, eat them.”

“If they work for Hatch, they deserve it,” Zeus said.

“No,” I said. “They might be victims of the Elgen too. But if we let them go, they could alert the Elgen.”

“I vote that we bring Raúl with us,” Ostin said. “He could help us. Then, when we’re done, he can come back on his own and free them.”

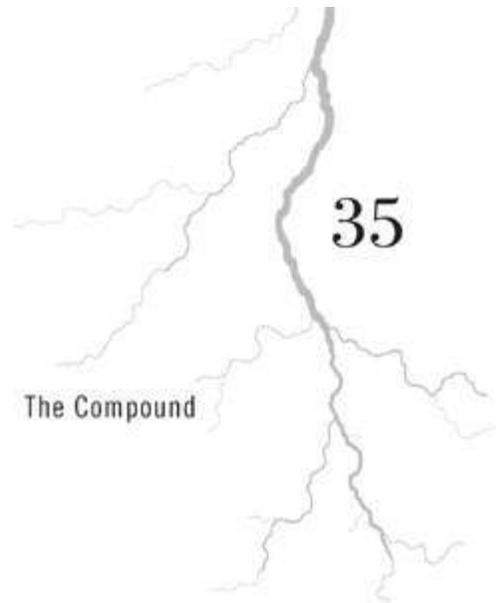
I thought over the idea. “You trust him that much?”

Ostin nodded. “I do.”

I looked at Taylor. “How about you?”

“Me too,” she said.

I was doubtful but said, “Let’s talk with him.”



“He understands a little bit of English,” Ostin said.

“Can you help us get in?” I asked.

Raúl nodded.

“If you help us, we’ll let you come back and free the others. Do you understand?”

He nodded again.

I looked at Taylor, and she nodded. “All right.” I pulsed and melted through Raúl’s ropes, which seemed to both intrigue and frighten him. Ostin gave him back his clothes and waited for him to dress. “Let’s go,” I said.

“*Vámonos*,” Ostin said.

The four of us walked back over to the others. They were surprised to see the rancher with us. “Raúl knows the way, so he’s going to drive the first truck. Jack, you follow us.”

Jack looked at Raúl suspiciously. “You sure you can trust him?”

“Taylor read his mind. She trusts him.”

“Ostin,” Jack said. “Translate this.” He pointed at Raúl. “You betray us, I’ll make sure you go down with us. Understand?”

Ostin translated. Raúl frowned.

Zeus added to the threat. "Tell him that if he turns us in, I'll electrocute him *first*. Make sure he understands that."

Ostin nodded and translated that as well.

Raúl looked as indignant as he was afraid. "*Los odio también,*" he said.

"He says he hates the Elgen too," Ostin said.

"We'll see," Jack said.

"Raúl will drive the first truck," I said to Jack. "You, Zeus, Ian, Abi, and McKenna follow us. Stay close."

The warning lights on the electric fence still hadn't come on, so I checked it once more, then we all climbed through and walked to the trucks.

Raúl said something to Ostin, who seemed to be nodding his head in agreement.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He says we should bring back the bull. Otherwise it will look suspicious."

I looked over at the dead animal. "Good idea."

Raúl got in the truck and finished hoisting the bull into the truck bed.

* * *

The ranch was nearly five miles in diameter and was composed of hilly terrain. We drove for several minutes before we could even see the compound. The sight of it filled us all with dread.

We drove on, crossing diagonally across the main road to avoid other cars and trucks.

As Raúl had explained, the compound was surrounded by two large fences with guard towers perched high on the corners, the silver barrels of their mounted machine guns glistening in the sun. The place reminded me of the pictures I'd seen in my history book of World War II German prison camps, though this place was clearly much more high-tech.

The compound's checkpoint was a hive of activity, with trucks, cars, and buses backed up for more than a hundred yards and dozens

of guards, many with leashed dogs, checking the vehicles that awaited entry. The dogs were large and muscular, and I wondered what breed they were.

“Rottweilers,” Ostin said, as if reading my mind.

“What?”

“That’s what type of dogs those are. Very powerful. I wonder if they’re electric.”

The guards were wearing the same Elgen uniforms as the guards who had attacked our safe house.

As we got closer to the compound my tics increased and I began to gulp, something I didn’t notice until Taylor started gently rubbing my back. The compound was bigger than I expected and reminded me a little of the Boise State University campus, without the football stadium.

The Starxource plant, at the east end of the compound, was by far the largest of the buildings. I guessed it had to be nearly a hundred yards in diameter. Above it were three large exhaust pipes from which white smoke billowed into the air.

“Look at all that pollution,” Taylor said. “I thought this was supposed to be clean energy.”

“It is,” Ostin said. “Those are cooling towers. That’s steam emission. I’d bet my frontal lobe that’s where the rats are.”

Raúl pointed to a small gate near the plant and said, “There.”

“There’s the entrance,” I said. “Be alert.”

“*Todo el tiempo esta allá,*” Raúl said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“He said the guard’s there,” Ostin said.

“Should we turn back?” I asked.

Ostin asked Raúl, then said, “He says no. That would be too suspicious looking.”

“I’ll take care of him,” Zeus said.

“No,” Taylor said. “Let me try first.”

Raúl pulled the truck slowly up to the gate. The man at the gate, a stocky Peruvian man nearly as wide as he was tall, looked at us sternly. He said to Raúl, “*Quiénes son estos gringos? Dónde están Cesar y Alvaro?*”

Suddenly the man bent over, grimacing and holding his head.

Taylor said to Ostin, "Tell him that he's been expecting us, and we've just brought the bull back that was causing the problems."

Ostin translated.

The man blinked a few times, then waved us on. "*Sí. Adelante.*"

I turned to Taylor. "That was cool."

"Thanks," she said.

Raúl pulled through the gate. I motioned to Jack to follow us.

"Whoa," Ian said. "You won't believe what I'm seeing."

"The bowl?" Ostin said.

"Yeah, it's full of rats. Millions of them. And they're glowing like us. Only brighter and sort of an orange-red."

Raúl drove the truck up to the first of three metal doors. Even though we couldn't see anyone, the door slowly began to rise. Raúl said something to Ostin.

"This is where they take the meat to be processed," Ostin said. "We have to pull in here. It's their procedure, and it would look suspicious not to."

I looked into the dark entrance. Five men in ranchers' uniforms were waiting on the side of the concrete slip. Raúl slowly backed up into the space until a light came on. Jack pulled the second truck up to the side of the door.

"No," Raúl said. He began saying something very quickly to Ostin.

"He can't park there," Ostin said. "He needs to pull up next to the other trucks."

I hopped out of the truck, squeezing between the concrete wall and the vehicle until I was outside the building and close to Jack. "Raúl says to park there," I said, pointing. "But back in, just in case we need to make a run for it. Then meet us inside the building."

"Got it," Jack said.

When I returned, everyone was out of the truck and Raúl was talking to some of the ranchers who were inspecting the bull.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"They're trying to decide whether to use the bull to feed the guards or the rats. If it's the guards they'll send it to the butcher. If it's the rats it goes to the grid."

“What’s the grid?”

Ostin pointed up. Half of the room’s ceiling looked like the underside of a steel bowl. “The grid is where they make electricity from rats,” he said.

The men appeared to have made a decision because an electric forklift drove up to the back of the truck and lifted the bull, then carried it over to a metallic cage connected to a hydraulic lift. The bull was carefully lowered onto the platform.

After the forklift had backed away, a yellow light began flashing, accompanied by a shrill beeping sound. The lift began to rise. When the platform was halfway to the ceiling, a hole opened above it and the platform moved perfectly into place, sealing the gap.

“That’s cool,” Ostin said. “I wonder what’s up there.”

I turned to him. “Has anyone asked about us?”

He nodded. “The older guy with the mega-mustache is in charge. He asked Raúl where the other ranchers are, and Raúl told him they’re still out repairing the fence. He said they sent him back with the bull so a jaguar wouldn’t get it.”

“How’d he explain us?”

“He said one of the Elgen guards flagged him down near the checkpoint and made him bring us over to the ranch square. He said we’re ranchers from an American Starxource plant and we’ve been brought here to observe their operations.”

“Raúl’s pretty clever,” I said. “I almost believe his story.”

“Let’s hope mega-mustache does too.”

Jack and the others came inside, and we gathered together in the corner of the room, trying to keep out of sight, though not successfully. The ranch hands kept glancing over at us, though they were just interested in the girls.

“There are cameras everywhere,” Ostin said. “Not good. Not good.”

“I’d like to blow a few of them out,” Zeus said. “Just for fun.”

“What do you see, Ian?” I asked. “What is this building?”

“It’s their power plant. This corner is where they feed the rats. There’s a butchery to the right, with a refrigeration room. In front of us there’s a series of tunnels and a lot of water pipes and conveyor belts. Directly under the bowl is a huge funnel.”

“For the rat droppings,” Ostin said. “If there’s really a million rats up there, they’re going to be moving several tons of droppings a day. That’s why there’s a manure processing plant outside.” He shook his head. “Man, I’d die for a look inside that bowl.”

“I’m sure Hatch would be happy to arrange both,” Taylor said.

“There are water pipes everywhere,” Ian said. “Like hundreds of them.”

“Cooling pipes,” Ostin said. “The bowl is like a nuclear reactor. With that much heat it would need a giant cooling system to keep it from melting down. Kind of like a car’s radiator.”

Ian turned a little to the west. Looking up, he said, “There’s an observatory up there, so they can see inside the bowl. On this level on the other side of the building it looks nearly identical to the laboratories back at the academy. Except in one of the rooms there are rows of cages filled with rats.”

“Probably where they breed and electrify them,” Ostin said.

Ian continued panning the room. “Over there are more offices.” He turned to his left. “Hmm. They aren’t offices. It’s a jail. Along this wall are five cells. The three closest are empty, the fourth one has an older man in it, and there’s someone in the fifth, but I can’t tell what they look like.”

“Is it my mother?”

Ian shook his head. “No. It’s a guy. And whoever it is, he’s glowing. He’s one of us.”

“Maybe it’s Bryan,” Zeus said. “He was always getting in trouble. But he’d just cut through the door. Does he have any of those wires on him?”

“He’s wired,” Ian said.

“That explains it,” Zeus said. “Gotta be Bryan.”

“Maybe he’ll join us,” Taylor said. “We could use him.”

Zeus shook his head. “No. He won’t join us. Those guys are loyal to Hatch.”

“Maybe he’ll change his mind like you did,” Taylor said.

Zeus looked at her. “Maybe. But I doubt it.”

“I want to know who it is,” I said. “If Hatch is losing control of his kids, I want to know why. What type of locks are on the doors?”

“Old-fashioned kind,” Ian said.

“So we need a key.”

“Or explosives,” Ostin said.

“Or Bryan,” Zeus said.

“What do you see outside the building?” I asked.

“More buildings. The building closest to us looks like a prison or jail. A lot of bars.”

“The Reeducation facility,” Ostin said. “It’s next to the assembly hall. Is there a bigger building next to it?”

Ian nodded. “Yeah. The guards are eating lunch in there. There’s got to be more than a thousand guards in there right now.”

“That’s the assembly hall, all right,” Ostin said. “North of it should be the dormitories.”

“Yep. Bunk rooms. A lot of them. There’re guards in there, too. How do you know this?”

“I studied the plans. What else do you see?”

“Past it, on the other side, there are maybe forty or fifty tents. There are guards in all of them.”

“Temporary shelter for the visiting guards,” Ostin said.

“This place is crawling with guards,” Ian said. “They’re everywhere.”

“Good,” I said. “Once we find some guard outfits, we can move freely around the complex.”

Raúl walked back to Ostin and started speaking. Ostin listened intently and asked a few questions before turning to us. “Raúl says that his boss told him to give us a tour of their operations. He also says we need to be careful because there are three Elgen guards assigned to the ranch house. Two of them are new here, so they’ll be easy to fool, but it’s best if we don’t talk to the guards at all.”

“Will the other ranchers tell the guards about us?” I asked.

Ostin asked Raúl, then said, “He doesn’t think so. They don’t like the guards.”

“Where are the guards now?” I asked.

“He said they’re at lunch.”

“We can jump them for their uniforms when they get back,” Jack said.

“With all these cameras around, that’s risky,” Ostin said.

“Being here is risky,” Taylor said.

“Maybe we don’t have to jump them,” I said. “Ostin, ask Raúl if he knows if the guards have a uniform locker around here.”

Ostin translated. Raúl’s answer was surprisingly long, and Ostin looked very interested in what he had to say. When Raúl finished speaking, Ostin said, “He says they have a guard room over there by the door, but the ranchers are not allowed near it. But he knows where there are some Elgen guard uniforms no one will miss.”

I couldn’t believe our good fortune. “Really?”

“He said that when they built the compound they put in emergency drainage pipes. The pipes are always empty and large enough for a man to crawl through. They run underground below the compound and fence and empty about a hundred yards out into the jungle.

“The guards aren’t allowed into town alone, but some of them have Peruvian girlfriends, so they uncapped one of the pipes, and every night a few of them sneak out. They secretly call it the Weekend Express. The guards don’t wear their uniforms in town because the other guards might report them and the townspeople sometimes attack them if they’re alone, so they change their clothes and leave their uniforms inside. A few of the guards have left and never come back, so their uniforms are still there.”

“How many?”

“He remembers seeing three.”

“Where are these pipes?”

“In a mechanical room behind the butchery and refrigeration.”

“Can he take us to them?”

Raúl understood the question and said, “*Sí. Más adelante.*”

“Later,” Ostin said.

Raúl led us to the southeast corner of the room, stopping again near the cage lift, which had lowered back down without the bull. Raúl put on a show, giving us a demonstration of how the lift worked, while mega-mustache watched us from his corner. Afterward, Raúl led us to the butchery and the refrigeration room, where large slabs of meat hung from overhead hooks. It was so cold we could see our breath.

Ostin said, "Raúl says on really hot days the guards hang out in here."

Jack began pummeling a hanging beef like a punching bag. "Look, I'm Rocky."

Taylor shook her head.

At the back of the refrigeration room were green metal doors. Raúl said something to Ostin.

"He says it's best that we don't all go back to the mechanical room. There are three uniforms there, so we should decide who is changing into them."

"I need to decide who's coming with me to find my mother," I said. I turned to Ian. "I'm going to need you."

"I'm there," he said.

"Who else wants to come with me?"

Jack, Zeus, and Taylor raised their hands.

"You know they'll spot you a mile away," I said to Taylor.

"I know. I just want to help."

"You can help back here." I looked at Jack and Zeus. "Jack, you come."

Zeus started to protest, but I cut him off. "Look, if things turn bad, we're going to need you to get everyone out. Besides, I don't want you anywhere near Hatch. I think you're the only one Hatch hates more than me."

He nodded. "You're right." He looked at Jack, and I braced myself for another argument. Instead Zeus raised his hand. "Bring them back."

Jack hit it. "I'll do my best."

I breathed out in relief. "Let's go."

Jack, Ostin, Ian, and I followed Raúl into the mechanical room. The room was dim enough that my and Ian's glow could be seen.

Raúl looked at us in wonder. "*Ustedes extraterrestres?*"

Ostin grinned. "He wants to know if you and Ian are aliens."

"Tell him yes," I said.

Near the back of the room were four massive conduits that rose from the ground up to the ceiling. Raúl pointed to a pipe with a horizontal plug. It was capped with a metal lid and a locking latch.

"Is that the one?" I asked.

Raúl nodded, then gestured to another door just past the pipes. He opened the door to reveal piles of civilian clothing.

"How many guys are sneaking out of this place?" Jack asked.

"*Muchos*," Raúl said.

We found four uniforms in the closet instead of the expected three.

Raúl looked concerned and pulled one of the uniforms to him. "*Sudor*," he said.

Ostin touched the uniform. "It's sweaty. The guy is still out there."

"Not for long," Ian said, pointing to the ground. "He's coming back up." Suddenly we heard the sound of someone in the pipe.

"I guess our guard's coming home," I said.

"We could lock him out," Jack said. "Or knock him out. Either works for me."

"No," I said. "Let's see if he knows anything about my mother."

The lid suddenly opened, pushed up with one hand, and a machete fell out to the concrete floor. Then a head appeared. The man was starting to climb out when he saw us and froze. I could tell he was considering fleeing back into the pipe.

Ian waved his hand, "No worries, bro. We're doing the same thing you are. Weekend Express. Our man Raúl here is hooking us up with his cousins."

The man's expression relaxed. "Oh, right."

Jack pulled the lid back for the guard, and he climbed out. He was a big man, at least an inch taller than Jack, and he picked up his machete, then walked past us to the closet, where he stripped off his street clothing. "You guys look young. What are they doing, recruiting at high schools now?"

"Better early than late," Ostin said. "We're part of the Elgen Empowering Youth program."

The man shook his head. "Never heard of it." He pulled up his pants and fastened his utility belt. "You done the tunnel before?"

"No," I said. "First time."

"Watch for snakes. Condensation forms on the pipe and the snakes like it. They hang out near the mouth. Last night I killed an eyelash pit viper on the way out."

"*Bothriechis schlegelii*," Ostin said. "About eighteen inches long?"

He held up his stained machete. "Not anymore."

"Thanks for the warning," I said.

He sat down on a crate to pull on his boots. "No problem. But I've gotta hurry, my shift is in ten."

"Where are you stationed?" I asked.

He laced up his boots. "At the gate until a week ago. That's where I met my darlin' milkmaid," he said with a grin. "She was bringing in *leche* for the troops. Now they got me over at the Re-Ed."

"Re-Ed," Ostin said. He looked at me. "Reeducation. The *prison*."

"Yeah," he said, standing. "Not bad duty. At least it's air-conditioned." He pulled off his shirt and donned a black Elgen one.

I took a step toward the guard. "I hear there's an American woman in there."

He looked up as he buttoned his shirt, his mouth wide in a dark grin. "Yeah, and she's all that you've heard."

"Is she?" I asked. I could feel my face turning red.

Ostin shook his head at me in warning.

"Oh yeah. But we're not allowed to go near her. She's Hatch's pet. But I keep my eye on her if you know what I mean. I've had some fun with her." He laughed. "A couple days ago I made her do a belly dance for a glass of water."

I looked at him dully, steeling my anger behind my eyes. "Sharon," I said.

"Yeah. That's her name. How'd you know that?"

I put my hand on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "She's my mother."

His scream never made it past his lips. I had never shocked anyone that hard before, and I could feel his skin blister beneath my fingers. I didn't stop, even after he dropped to the ground and I had crouched down next to him. I was so electric that sparks were shooting at him from my knees and thighs.

"Michael," Jack said. "Bro!"

Ostin shouted, "Michael, stop it! You'll kill him!"

I stepped back, blue-white sparks still zigzagging between my fingers.

Raúl was looking at me in terror. Everyone was silent.

Ostin cautiously stepped toward me. "You okay?"

I was panting heavily. "Get his key. We just found our way in."

Ian took his key. Jack and Ian pulled off his uniform and carried him back to the pipe, dropped him in, then locked it. We dressed in the uniforms and helmets, choosing the ones that were closest to our sizes. I took a knife and cut four inches off my pants' length. Raúl took a grenade and baton from the fourth uniform.

"What's he doing?" I asked.

Ostin spoke to him. "He says he's helping us."

"He doesn't want to get mixed up in this," I said.

"He already is," Ostin said.

I looked at him, then nodded. "*Gracias.*"

He nodded back.

Ostin took the fourth uniform and rolled it up.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"How else are you going to get your mother out of a prison surrounded by two thousand guards?" Ostin said.

"You are a genius, my friend."

Ostin smiled. "Tell me something I don't know. Oh, wait, you can't."

I put my arm on his shoulder. "All right. Let's get my mother."



When we walked back out to the freezer, the rest of our group was huddled together, their arms wrapped around themselves against the cold. They stepped back when they saw us.

I raised my visor. "It's us."

Taylor held a hand to her chest. "Oh, you scared us. We thought you were real."

"Good," I said. "That's the idea."

"It's about time you got back," Wade said, annoyed. "We're freezing."

"Enjoy it while you can," Jack said. "Everything is about to heat up."

"We found out where my mother is," I said. "She's over in the Re-Ed."

"And we've got the key," Ian said, holding up a card.

"What's the plan?" Taylor asked.

"First, I want to see who's in that cell Ian saw. Then Ian, Jack, and I will go to the Re-Ed to find my mother. While we're gone, the rest of you need to see if you can find a way to shut down the power plant. But don't take any dumb chances. We're going to find my mom and get out of here as fast as we can." I took the GPS iPod out of my

pocket and gave it to Taylor. "If things go bad, get to the jungle as fast as you can. We'll catch up to you."

"But you won't know where the pickup is," Taylor said.

"She's right," Ostin said. "How will we find you?"

"This is only in case things go bad," I said. "But if we get separated we'll make our way back to Cuzco and hide out in a hotel under Jack's name. The voice can call the hotels and find us. But don't wait for us. Promise me."

Taylor looked upset but relented. "Okay. I promise."

"Do you remember how to use the GPS?"

"Yes. Colby Cross."

We walked from the refrigeration room back out through the butchery. The three of us in guard uniforms walked out first. I could see what Raúl had meant about the ranchers hating the guards. They avoided even looking at us. Taylor and the others followed a few yards behind us. Raúl led us through a set of double doors at the side of the room that opened to a long, tiled corridor.

"The cells are there," Ian said, pointing toward a magnetic keypad next to a thick, metal door. "There's a guard inside."

"Maybe he'll let us in," I said. "Ostin, ask Raúl what the guards' names are."

Raúl did his best to pronounce the names. "Ste-ven, Kork, Sco-tt."

"Steven, Kirk, and Scott," I repeated. I hit the button on the keypad.

"Who is it?"

"It's Kirk," I said.

"What do you need?"

"We're bringing an American group through on a tour."

"I can't let you do that."

"Dr. Hatch's instructions. They are about to open a new Starxource facility in New Mexico, and he wants them to see every inch of this place."

"You know the rules. This is a controlled access. No one comes in here without direct EGG written clearance."

"And you know that Hatch changes the rules whenever he pleases."

“And you know what he does when you break a rule. No form, no entry.”

I looked at Taylor. “Try it,” I whispered.

She concentrated.

“Now open the door,” I said. “We’re on a tight schedule.”

“I don’t care if you’re on a tightrope,” he said angrily.

Ostin stepped forward. “I have the form,” he said into the intercom.

“Why didn’t you just tell me,” I said, playing along.

“Because I assumed we wouldn’t need it,” Ostin said.

“He’s got it,” I said. “Open up.” I turned to Zeus, and he nodded.

The doorknob turned and opened. The guard, who was tall and muscular, blocked the door with his body and reached out his hand. “Let me see the—”

Zeus blasted the man so hard it knocked him back against the opposite wall. We hurried inside, shutting the door behind us. Jack grabbed the keys from the unconscious guard and opened the second cell, and he and Wade dragged the guard inside, tying him to the bed with leather restraints. They locked the door behind him.

“Which room is the Glow in?” I asked.

“Fourth one,” Ian said, pointing to a cell door. Jack threw me the keys, and I unlocked the door, then slowly pushed it open. The cell was small—about half the size of my bedroom at home—and was dark and musty. There was a figure huddled under a blanket on a mat in the corner of the room. I pulled the wire out of the RESAT machine and the figure groaned a little.

“We’re here to help,” I said.

The figure moved, and his head slowly rose. Peering between the covers was a red-haired boy with freckles and deep blue eyes. His skin was puffy, and he was pale and trembling.

“Tanner?” McKenna said.

He looked up, his face twisted in disbelief. “McKenna?”

She went to his side. “What have they done to you?”

He dropped his head back down. “Everything.”

“You know him?” I asked.

“We were captured the same week. What are you doing here?”

“Hatch locked me up.”

I unfastened the RESAT from his chest and set it on the ground next to him.

He breathed a loud sigh of relief. “How did you get out of purgatory? And what is Tara doing here?” he asked, looking at Taylor.

“That’s Taylor, Tara’s twin, and Michael.”

“In the flesh,” Tanner said. “The last two. Hatch told me they found you.”

“Did he tell you we shut down the Pasadena facility and escaped?” McKenna asked.

“He left that part out.” He looked at Zeus. “Frank. How are you, buddy?”

“Alive and shocking,” he said. “Why do they have you locked up?”

“I tried to bring down a plane.”

“That’s what you do,” Zeus said.

Tanner smiled darkly. “The one we were flying on.”

“That would do it,” Zeus said.

“You tried to kill yourself?” Taylor asked.

“Yeah,” he said indifferently. “I almost succeeded, too.” He exhaled. “They brought me in here. The guards have this new device. It’s called a RESAT.” He looked at Zeus. “Since when are you on the outs with the Elgen?”

“Since I met Michael,” he said. “And learned the truth.”

“What truth?”

“That Hatch has been using us.”

Tanner sneered. “You think?”

“What have they done to you?” Taylor asked.

“Nothing I didn’t deserve,” he said. “I’ve done bad, bad stuff.”

“Whatever you did, it’s not your fault,” McKenna said.

Tanner grimaced. “Not my fault? Do you have any idea how many people I’ve killed? Thousands. I pulled the trigger. I’m one of the worst mass murderers in history. I make Jack the Ripper look like a jaywalker.” He shook his head. “Not my fault.”

“Let’s get him out of here,” I said.

“No! Stay away.” His voice softened. “They’re going to feed me to the rats, you know. Fitting punishment for one of the biggest mass

murderers in history.”

Taylor walked to his side. “May I touch you?”

“That’s an odd introduction,” he said. “But why not.” He tried to reach out his hand but was unable to.

“I just want to help,” Taylor said.

“By all means,” he said, sounding almost comical. “Help away, whatever your name is, Tara’s twin.”

“Taylor,” she said. She laid a hand on his shoulder. “Oh no.”

“What are you doing?” he said. He looked at McKenna. “What is she doing?”

Taylor burst into tears. “No!”

“She’s reading your mind,” I said.

In spite of his weakness, Tanner pulled away from her, lifting the blanket up to his chin. “Keep out of my mind. I don’t want you to see what’s in my mind.”

Taylor couldn’t stop crying. I put my arm around her, and she laid her head on my shoulder.

Tanner glared at us. “Stay away from me!”

Abigail had been standing by the door, but now she walked up to Tanner.

“Don’t touch me,” he said to her.

“It’s okay,” McKenna said. “She’s my best friend.”

“Well,” Tanner said sarcastically, “with that ringing endorsement. By all means.” He looked at Abigail. “You one of us?”

She nodded. “I can make you feel better.”

His eyes narrowed to slits. “No you can’t.”

Abigail looked into his eyes and held her hand up to him. “May I try?” She slowly reached out and touched him.

Almost immediately his expression changed. His eyes closed in relief and the look of pain left his face. Then he began to cry. When he could speak he said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Abigail said.

“Are you healing me?”

“I’m sorry. I can only do this while we’re touching.”

“Then don’t stop touching me. Please.” Tanner looked over at us as if suddenly remembering we were all in the room. “Are you rescuing

me?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I know some places in Italy where we can hide, if you can get me out of here.”

“We’re not in Italy,” Taylor said.

“Where are we?”

“Peru,” I said.

His eyes widened. “Peru? How did I get in Peru?”

“We don’t know,” I said. “But we’ll take you with us. Can you walk?”

“I don’t know. I thought I was still in Italy. Who knows how long they’ve had me hooked up to that machine.”

Zeus walked over and took his arm. “C’mon, buddy. I’ll help you up.” He helped Tanner to his feet.

“What about the other prisoners?” Taylor asked.

“We don’t have time to rescue everyone,” Jack said. “We get Michael’s mom and get out of here.”

“He’s right,” I said. “Every minute we’re here the more danger we’re in.” I turned to Taylor. “We’re going to go look for my mom now. If you can find a way to shut this plant down, do it. Otherwise, be ready to go.”

I looked at Ostin. “Taylor’s in charge. Work together. We’ll be back in less than an hour.”

“Michael,” Taylor said.

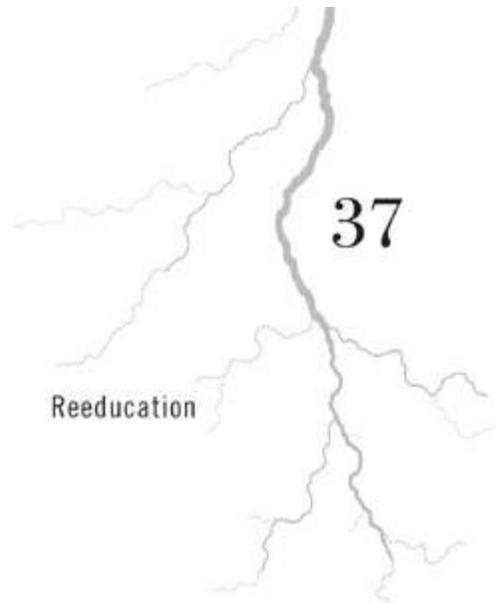
“Yes.”

She put her arms around me. “Hurry back.”

“Of course. Keep everyone safe.” I lowered my visor. “Let’s go, guys.”

Ian and Jack pushed down their visors as well. “*Hasta luego*, baby,” Jack said.

We left them standing inside the prison.



The three of us walked out of the Starxource building into the blinding Peruvian sunshine. Ian hadn't exaggerated; there were guards everywhere.

"That's the Reeducation building," I said, gesturing with my head.

"I've got the key," Ian said.

"We just don't know what it's good for," I said.

Near the Re-Ed door was a guard sitting inside a cylindrical booth.

"Ian, is there another way in?" I asked.

"Through the assembly hall, but it's worse. There are two guards at the door and about fifty just walking around."

"I say we try curtain number one," Jack said.

"What's the booth made of?"

Ian shook his head. "Plastic. All plastic."

"Great."

"Maybe he'll just let us in," Jack said.

"It's worth a try," I said.

We approached the building, pretending to be talking to one another. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the guard in the booth drinking from a metal Thermos. He set it down as we walked past him to the door. "Hey!" he shouted.

I turned back. "Yeah?"

"What are you doing?"

I looked at his name tag. "Lieutenant Cox, we're here for our shift," I said.

He stared at me dully. "There's no shift change at this hour."

"We were told to report here," Ian said. "We were just reassigned from the gate."

"Who reassigned you?"

When none of us answered, the man's eyes narrowed. "Let me guess. Anderson."

I glanced at Ian, and he shook his head.

"Come on," I said. "Don't make me name names. We're just doing as we were told."

"So it is Anderson. That's the third time this month that idiot's done this. I'm writing him up."

"All right," Jack said. "Do what you need to do, but we've got to get in before we're written up."

"All right." He pushed a button and a lock on the door buzzed. Jack quickly grabbed the door and pulled it open.

"Hold up, there. I still need your IDs."

We glanced back and forth at each other. The only ID we'd found in our guard uniforms was in Ian's pocket, and the photo was of an Asian guard.

I reached into my pocket, digging around in the empty space. "I must have left it back at the gate."

"What do you mean, you left it? No one forgets their ID. You know the penalty for not having it with you. You better find it before you're caught or I turn you in." He looked at Ian and Jack. "You two, show me yours."

Ian glanced at me. "Sure," he said. He reached into his pocket and brought out the ID. I looked back at the guard.

"C'mon," I said. "Lieutenant Cox doesn't have all day."

"You got that right."

I put Ian's ID on the counter upside down and slid it partway through the opening in the window. As Cox reached for it, I magnetically pulled his metal thermos over, spilling the liquid. The

fluid rushed out over his hands and down the front of the counter, giving me the conductivity I needed. I put my hand in the liquid and pulsed as hard as I could. Electricity flashed and Cox collapsed to the ground.

I looked back at Jack and Ian. “We’ve got to hurry. I don’t know how long he’ll be out.”

Jack held the door for us as we rushed inside. The interior of the building looked like a large elementary school with video monitors and screens everywhere. A strange noise played over the intercom system.

“They’re in pink,” Ian said, looking at a row of inmates.

“Welcome to Looneyville,” Jack said.

“What kind of prison is this?” I asked.

“Reeducation,” Ian said. “It’s where they brainwash you. Hatch was experimenting with brainwashing at the academy.”

In spite of all the cameras, we moved through the facility undisturbed. I turned to Ian. “Where is she?”

Ian casually looked around. “I think I found her. End of the second hall to our right.”

My heart jumped. I couldn’t believe she was so close.

“Don’t stare,” I said to Jack, who looked fascinated by what he was seeing.

“Don’t gulp,” Jack replied.

“Sorry,” I said, taking a few deep breaths to calm myself. We walked slowly down the hall, then, when no one was around, strode up to the door. “This is it?” I asked Ian.

“She looks like the picture,” Ian said. “Mostly.”

I could guess what he meant. Ian ran the key we’d taken from the guard over the magnetic pad: A light flashed green, and we heard the sound of the lock turning.

I pulled open the door. It was dark inside, but I recognized what I was looking at—it was the same room Hatch had shown me on the monitor at the academy when I was ordered to electrocute Wade. Inside the cell was a metal cage. The prisoner huddled in the corner of the cell looked small and feeble, but there was no mistaking who she was. She was my mother.



“Mom,” I said, running toward the cage.

She flinched when she saw me, then scooted herself as far back from us as possible. “Leave me alone.”

I took off my helmet. “Mom. It’s me.”

She leaned forward, her eyes blinking rapidly. “Stop it!” she said. “Enough of your tricks.”

“It’s no trick. We’re here to get you out.”

“How dare you use my boy against me. How *dare* you?”

“Mom, I’m real. Ask me something. Ask me something no one else would know.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What’s my son’s favorite place to eat?”

“Mac’s Purple Pig Pizza Parlor and Piano Pantry,” I said.

“You’re a fake. My son would never call it that.”

What was I thinking?

“It’s PizzaMax,” I said. “I call it PizzaMax. We went there on my birthday.”

“So did Hatch.”

“Ask me something else.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Mom. Please.” My voice was pleading. “Please believe me.”

“Quit calling me that.”

“It’s me. Don’t you know your own son?”

Her expression softened a little. “What did I give you for your birthday?”

“Dad’s watch.”

She shook her head. “No. I already told you that one. I told you. What does the engraving on the watch say?”

My eyes welled up. “I love you forever.”

This time my answer seemed to reach her. “How do you know that?”

“Because I read it every day.” I pulled back my sleeve to reveal the watch.

I saw the doubt leave her eyes. “Michael,” she said.

She scooted herself forward and I ran to her, putting my arms through the cage. “Oh, Michael,” she said.

“We’ve got to get you out of here, before they catch us.”

“How? There are guards everywhere.”

“We’re going to dress you as a guard, then we’re going to walk out the front door.”

Suddenly a light started blinking on a black box on the top of the cage. A feminine automated voice said, “Code required. Please input code. Arming capacitor. Commencing countdown. Twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three . . .”

“What’s that?” I asked.

Her eyes showed her fear. “It’s an alarm, it needs to be shut off when you come in. Do you know the code?”

“No. What will it do?”

A green light turned on in the box above her cell.

“When it reaches zero it will electrocute me.”

“Seventeen, sixteen, fifteen . . .”

“Ian!” I shouted. “We’ve got to get her out of here. Now!”

“I don’t have a key.”

“Find one!”

“I’m looking!” he shouted frantically. “Jack, that guard right there. He’s got a key ring. Get it!”

Jack ran out into the hall and smacked the guard over the head with his baton. Jack grabbed him by the back of his collar and dragged him into the cell. Ian went after the key.

“Eight, seven . . .”

“Hurry!” I shouted.

“I’m hurrying!” Ian said. He ripped the key ring from the man’s pocket. “It’s gotta be one of these,” he said, fumbling through them. He tried one and it didn’t work.

“Three, two, one. Capacitor armed. Prepare for discharge.”

My mother looked into my eyes. “Michael . . .”

“Get back!” I shouted. I grabbed the bars, pressing my entire body against the cage, and braced myself for the release. There was a bright flash and a powerful snap of electricity, the force of which threw me to the ground. Then all was quiet. The air was full of a powerful smell of ozone.

“Michael?” Ian said.

I slowly opened my eyes. Then I looked in the cage. My mother was standing against the bars staring at me, her eyes wide with panic. “Michael?”

I suddenly started to laugh.

“It fried his mind,” Jack said.

I slowly climbed to my feet. “No. What a rush. Let’s get out of here.”

Ian continued through the rest of the keys until he found the right one. The lock slid, and he opened the door.

My mother stepped out and threw her arms around me. Tears fell down both our faces. “You shouldn’t have come,” she said. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“You can ground me when we get back to Idaho,” I said.

She wiped her eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Lots of love in here,” Ian said, his voice pitched. “But out there, not so much.”

“Sorry,” I said, stepping back. I reached down and picked up the extra uniform. “Put this on,” I said to my mother. We had saved the smallest of the Elgen uniforms for her. She quickly pulled it on. It was

way too big on her, but she looked all right if you didn't look too closely.

The bigger problem was her trouble walking. She'd been kept in a cage for weeks and her legs muscles were weak and cramped. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I'd carry you if I could," I said. "But they'd notice."

"Just give me a minute," she said, leaning against the wall to stretch her legs.

"Mom," I said. "This is Jack and Ian. They're my friends. I couldn't have made it here without them."

"Thank you," she said, straightening up. "I'm ready."

"It's clear," Ian said.

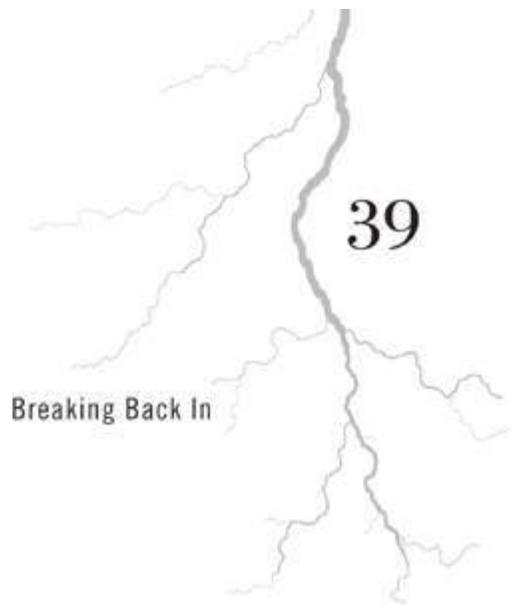
Jack opened the door, and we stepped out of the cell, shutting the door behind us. We walked down the hall, back toward the doors we'd entered through.

Ian stopped abruptly. "Change of plans," he said. "Lieutenant Cox is back in action and buzzing like a mad hornet. Follow me."

We ducked down the first hall we came to just as Cox and two guards stormed past us.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Into the hive," Ian said.



The doors to the assembly hall opened automatically at our approach and we walked into a room full of hundreds of guards. Most of the guards were gathered in small clusters. Then I saw him. Hatch was standing in a corner of the room. I froze.

“What is it?” Ian asked.

“Hatch,” I said.

He was surrounded by a group of guards dressed in black and red. Standing near them were three of the electric kids I had seen pictures of in my room at the academy: Quentin, Tara, and Bryan. There was also a kid I’d never seen before..

“Who’s the other kid?” I asked.

“His name is Torstyn,” Ian said. “You don’t want to meet him.”

“He’s electric?”

“Yeah. He’s dangerous. Let’s get out of here.”

I turned back. “Where’s Jack?”

“Oh no,” Ian said.

Jack was already twenty feet from us. He had his hand on his belt and was walking toward Hatch. I pushed through the guards, catching up to him halfway across the floor. “What are you doing?”

His jaw was clenched. "He burned down my house."

"You won't make it within twenty feet of him."

He kept walking. "I'll take my chances."

"They'll capture you."

"Let them try."

We were now only fifty feet away from Hatch.

"He'll capture *us*."

Only then did he stop.

"This isn't the time," I said. "We've got to get out of here."

Jack took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. "This isn't over."

We turned and walked east through the assembly hall, then, meeting up with Ian and my mom, went out into the yard.

"Where are we going?" my mother asked.

"Back to the others," I said. "They're in the power plant."

"Others?"

"There are a bunch of us."

We had to walk past the Re-Ed entrance again to get to the power plant, so we waited for a large group of guards to pass by and blended in with them. When we arrived at the plant, we found a guard standing in front of the main entrance. It had been so easy getting out that I hadn't considered the difficulty of getting back in.

"Can we walk around to the ranchers' entrance?" Jack asked.

Ian shook his head. "There's a twelve-foot fence with razor wire."

"Whatever we're doing, we better decide fast," Jack said. "Cox is back and gathering a crowd."

Lieutenant Cox was talking to a dozen other guards, who were passing around an electronic tablet.

"Ian, what are they looking at?" I asked.

He turned to me with a grim expression. "Us."

"We need to create a distraction," Jack said.

As I looked at the guarded door I had an idea. "Maybe the guard can be the distraction. Ian, can you see his ID?"

"It's lying on the platform," Ian said. "Cal . . . Calvin Gunnel."

"Cal's my new best friend," I said. "Go along with me." I turned to my mother. "You better keep a few yards back. I don't think there are any female guards down here."

She looked nervous but nodded.

“Ready?” Ian said.

I took a deep breath to get my twitching under control. “Let’s do it.”

We walked up to the guard, a broad-shouldered man with a scar on his cheek partially concealed by a sandy beard. He reminded me of a lumberjack.

“Cal?” I said.

He looked up at me.

“Cal Gunnel?” I walked closer to him, pointing to myself with both thumbs. “It’s me. Michael.”

His brow furrowed. I could tell he was trying to place me.

“I’ve been looking for you for days. I owe you big-time, man. And don’t you think I’ve forgotten. I never forget a favor.”

“Wait,” Ian said. “This is the Cal you were talking about?”

“I told you it was him.” I turned back to the guard. “When’s your next leave?”

The guard was glancing back and forth between us, looking more confused by the moment. “Tuesday. What—”

I didn’t let him finish. “Okay. I’m going to have to trade some shifts, but you and I are going to Lima. I know this club, and let’s just say you’re going to be glad you did me a favor.”

He stared at me for a moment, then said, “I have no idea who you are.”

I faked a laugh. “Yeah, right.” Then I looked into his face. “You’re not kidding, are you?” I pointed to myself. “Cal, it’s me.”

“You sure you got the right guy?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “How many Cal Gunnels are there in Puerto Maldonado?”

He squinted. “Michael, right?”

“Michael. Who else? Whatever you told Anderson made the difference. I can’t thank you enough for helping me.”

“Anderson,” he said, nodding. “It helped, huh?”

“I’ll say. I don’t know what you have on him, but you, my friend, have clout.” I turned to Jack. “You don’t want to get on Cal’s bad side, you know what I mean? This guy is powerful.” I turned back. “Next

Tuesday. You can leave your *dinero* at home, this party is on me. I guarantee you will never forget this trip." I put out my hand. "See you then?"

"All right," he said. "Next Tuesday." He took my hand.

I dropped him like a bad habit. As I had anticipated, at least a dozen guards saw him fall.

"Get everything you can from him," I said to Jack. "But act like you're helping him."

Jack knelt down next to him, ripping the magnetic key from around his neck, then going through his pockets.

"Medic!" I shouted. "Medic!"

Guards began to move in toward us.

When there was a circle around us I said, "I think it's sunstroke."

"Clear out," one of the guards in a purple uniform said. "Give me room."

We stepped away from the crowd and the guard knelt down next to Cal, putting his fingers on the man's neck. "Heartbeat's strong. Looks like sunstroke." He stood, grabbing the phone from the podium. "We need a stretcher at Starxource west. Another sunstroke."

As the crowd milled around him, I caught my mother's eye and gestured toward the door. With more than twenty guards standing around us, the four of us opened the locked door and walked into the plant unnoticed.

At least I thought we had.



Once we were back inside the cool of the plant I asked Ian, “Where are they?”

“They’re over that way,” Ian said, pointing toward the center of the building. “The trick is getting to them. This place is built like a rat’s maze.”

“Fitting,” I said. “What are they doing?”

“They’re near some breaker-looking things. I think they’re trying to figure out how to shut the grid down.”

“It’s too late for that,” I said. “We’ve got to get out of here before they discover my mother’s gone.”

Almost in answer to my words, the shrill scream of a siren sounded and yellow strobes began flashing in the hallways.

“Too late,” Jack said.

“Run!” Ian said.

With my mother in tow, we ran as fast as we could through the long, vacant corridors, winding our way toward our friends. The halls were covered with a metallic, slate-colored material and were lined with stainless steel water pipes about a foot in diameter, spaced six feet apart. We caught sight of the rest of our group in a long, dark

hallway halfway from the plant's entrance. Taylor was leading, with McKenna at her side providing light. They stopped when they saw us.

"Tay—" I started to say. Suddenly my head felt like it was caught in a clamp. All four of us dropped to our knees. Then Zeus shot Jack and me with electric bolts. Jack screamed out in pain, but the effect of the electricity on me was opposite. With renewed strength I took a deep breath and stood. Even Taylor's scrambling was no longer able to affect me.

"It's us!" I shouted.

"Stop!" Ostin shouted, raising his hands. "It's Michael!"

"Sorry!" Taylor said, clasping her hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry I didn't know it was you!" She ran to me. "And there are four of you."

"Taylor?" my mother said, taking off her helmet.

"Mrs. Vey!" Taylor said. "They found you."

"What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story," Taylor said.

"Your parents are going to kill me," my mother said.

"Hi, Mrs. Vey," Ostin said.

"You too, Ostin?"

"And a good thing too," I said. "He's saved us more than once."

Ostin grinned. "Just doing my job."

Zeus walked over to Jack and put out his hand. "Dude, I'm so sorry."

"Really?" Jack said. "Again?"

"We thought you were guards," he said anxiously.

Jack looked at him, then started to laugh. He took his hand. "I would have done the same thing."

Abigail walked up to Jack and hugged him. "I'm so glad you made it."

"Me too," Jack said.

I counted the group. There were ten of us. Two were missing. "Where are Raúl and Tanner?"

"Raúl took Tanner to the mechanical room," Taylor said. "He was having trouble walking. He said if there's trouble they'll escape through the pipe."

“Where are we?” I asked.

“We’re right under the bowl,” Ostin said. “These pipes are all water mains to cool the grid.”

“So how do we get out of here?” Zeus asked. “You can bet they’ve sealed off the compound. We’d never make it to the fence by car.”

“I say we join Raúl at the escape pipe,” I said. I turned to Ian. “How do we get there?”

“Three corridors down, on the left, there’s an air duct in the ceiling that leads back to the butchery.”

“All right,” I said. “This way.”

Suddenly the flashing lights around us stopped. Then a voice boomed from overhead speakers, echoing down the hallway. “Michael Vey. So pleased you could join us.”



Hatch's voice continued over the speakers. "You should have told us you were coming, Michael. I would have prepared something special. As usual you've made a mess of things. And, Frank, I knew you'd come back. Couldn't resist, could you? You and I are going to have some fun. We'll bob for apples. Throw water balloons. Good times for all."

"The name's Zeus," I said.

"Inconsequential," Hatch said. "Be advised that we have you completely sealed in and surrounded. So you have a choice. You and Frank can surrender yourselves, and your friends will have reasonably humane treatment. Or you can resist and you will all die painful deaths. It's your call. Either way will amuse me."

"Eat my shorts!" Ostin shouted.

"Oh, Ostin. You just can't keep out of this, can you? Tell you what. I'll up the ante. If Michael and Frank surrender, I'll spare all of your lives and throw in a box of jelly doughnuts for Ostin. So let's see how much Michael really cares for you."

"Don't listen to him," Taylor said.

"You want us, Hatch?" I shouted. "Come and get us!"

Hatch laughed. "I was hoping you'd say that. Captain Welch, make sure the cameras are all recording, I'm going to want a replay of this. Are we set?"

"Yes, sir," a voice said. "Gate is opening."

"Wonderful. Just wonderful. You know I always enjoy feeding my pets."

From the bowels of the corridor came a loud, echoing groan like the sound of a heavy metal gate. Suddenly a high-pitched screeching echoed down the hall, shrill as a fork on a chalkboard.

"What's that sound?" Taylor asked.

Ostin turned white. "It sounds like . . . rats."

"Run to the air duct!" I shouted. I put my arm around my mother and helped her. The darkness behind us began to turn amber, the corridor distantly illuminated by some strange source of light. The first wave of rats came into view like the initial stream of a river, growing steadily heavier and thicker as the rodents began overlapping and running on top of one another, their bodies glowing like lava. They quickly closed the gap between us.

Jack threw a concussion grenade behind us, which killed a few of them but barely slowed the mass.

"Taylor, can you stop them?" I shouted.

"I'll try."

She turned and faced them, her hands on her temples. Ten yards in front of us the flow stopped as some of the rats began running in circles, confused.

"It's working," I said.

I was premature. The first wave of rats were quickly overcome by the rats behind them, as they pushed forward and climbed or jumped over them.

"There are too many of them!" Taylor shouted.

It was difficult to hear her over the squeals, which had grown in volume until the mass of them sounded like the braking of a train on metal tracks. They continued to pour toward us.

"Up the pipes!" I shouted, pointing to the walls.

Everyone grabbed onto the pipes and began climbing. I pushed my mother up the nearest pipe, and she hooked the utility belt of her

uniform onto a bracket, holding her in place. I looked back down the hall. Everyone was up a pipe except Abigail, who was standing in the middle of the corridor staring at the oncoming rats, paralyzed by fear.

“Abi!” I shouted. “Climb up!”

She didn’t move.

“Abi!”

Suddenly she fainted, falling to the ground.

Jack jumped down from his pipe and ran for her while Zeus began shooting at the rats heading for them, killing all he could hit. Jack lifted her and ran back to his pipe. He tried to climb with her but couldn’t secure a strong enough handhold to pull them both up.

I jumped down from my pipe and ran to him. “Jack, climb up! Lift her!”

I took Abigail in my arms as Jack climbed up. He reached down and with one arm pulled her up. He hooked her blouse around a bracket to keep her from falling, then wrapped himself around her, holding them both in place.

“Michael!” Taylor shouted. “Look out!”

Zeus continued to pick off the rats, but it was like shooting rubber bands at a hive of angry hornets. Just as the first wave of rats hit my legs, I pulsed and the rodents that hit me died in a bright flash. But there were far too many. They began to swarm me, jumping higher and higher. I swatted at them, staggering to move away from them.

“Michael!” McKenna shouted, waving me to her. “Over here!” She was clinging to a pipe directly across from me. I tried to get to it, but walking was like trudging through mud. Slippery, flesh-eating mud.

Suddenly a rat about the size of a cat hit me in the chest, knocking me over. As I fell to the ground a wave of the rodents covered me. I pulsed with everything I had to keep them from eating me, but they were breaking through and I could feel their sharp teeth tearing at the Elgen uniform. My electricity was nearly exhausted. One last pulse, I told myself. Maybe I could kill enough rats to make a difference.

I wanted my last act to have some significance. I wanted my death to matter.

Just then I saw a brilliant light and felt a wave of heat. I could feel the weight of the rats lessen as they began jumping from my body. I

opened my eyes to see McKenna standing next to me, raging like a blast furnace. The frenzied rats were running away from her heat.

“Get up, Michael!” she shouted.

I pulled myself up, then staggered over to a pipe and used my magnetism to climb to the top of it. McKenna climbed up after me, keeping only her legs blazing to ward off the rats. She couldn’t get more than three feet from the ground. She was suffering from dehydration and looked pale and dizzy. I reached down, grabbed onto her blouse, and pulled her higher. “You need water, don’t you?”

Her mouth was too dry to answer. It was cruelly ironic—we were clinging to a twelve-inch water pipe and she was about to pass out from dehydration.

Hatch’s voice calmly echoed down the corridor. “I’m betting you wish you’d just stayed home about now.”

With McKenna’s heat gone the rats had returned tenfold, and the tile floor below us was no longer visible, just a rising sea of glowing fur.

McKenna was panting heavily, and I saw her grip on the pipe loosen.

“Hang on!” I shouted.

Her eyes were closed, and she slowly shook her head. “I can’t. . . .”

I swung my body around hers, pinning her against the pipe. “I’ve got you.”

The rats continued to pour down the hall, thousands, maybe tens of thousands, swarming below us, waiting for one of us to fall. As their numbers increased they rose like the tide, and as they got closer they started jumping at us. Most of them hit well below us, though I saw Ostin kick one off his leg. For the moment we were too high up the walls for them to reach us, but I knew it wouldn’t last. Soon they would be jumping on us, one or two, then dozens, dragging us down to the undulating fur below.

I wasn’t the only one who realized our predicament. Zeus, who was twenty feet ahead of me, began shooting out the hallway cameras. “If we’re going to die, it’s not for their entertainment!” he shouted.

Still they came. As far as I could see, the corridor glowed brilliant orange, like the inside of a toaster. I looked over at Taylor. Her eyes

were wide with terror. She looked over at me and for a moment we both just stared. “They just keep coming!” she shouted. “They’re like a river!”

“That’s it!” Ostin shouted. “Zeus, shoot out the ceiling sprinklers!”

Zeus turned back and looked at us.

“Blow out the sprinklers!” Ostin shouted. “They can’t take water. Do it or we’re goners!”

Zeus looked down at the rats, then at Jack and Abigail, then over at me.

“He can’t,” I said, not loud enough for anyone but McKenna to hear. “He’ll electrocute himself.” I looked at Zeus, wondering what he was thinking. He wore an expression that seemed to be less fear than sadness. He looked once more down the hall at the rising flow of rats, then pointed his hand toward the farthest sprinkler, visible in the distance by the rats’ glow.

“Don’t do it!” I yelled.

My shout was too late. Fierce yellow bolts of electricity shot from Zeus’s fingertips, connecting with the sprinkler head. At first nothing happened, then, like a breaking dam, water burst from the ceiling, starting from the sprinklers at the end of the hall, then, one by one, working its way toward us. I looked at Zeus, who was stoically watching the water approach. Then all the hall sprinklers blew. Water burst from the ceiling in a torrential downpour.

The rats shrieked as the water hit them, and electricity sparked wildly below us in sporadic, brilliant bursts, like camera flashes at a concert. I held tightly to McKenna as she leaned her head back and opened her mouth to catch the spray, drinking furiously.

Zeus screamed, then fell backward into the middle of the steaming rats.

“No!” I shouted.

In an instant Jack shouted, “*Semper Fi!*” He jumped from the wall and started running up the corridor toward Zeus, sinking thigh-deep in the squirming bodies of dying rats. By the time Jack reached him, Zeus was completely covered by the rats, a bulge in a pile of moving fur. He reached down and lifted Zeus up onto his shoulders, rats

falling off around him. Zeus's skin was severely blistered, and blood was streaming down his arms and legs from rat bites.

Jack struggled through the mound of rats, like he was dragging himself from a snowbank. As he pulled his legs out from the pile, rodents were still clinging to him, and he flung them off. He ran to the end of the corridor where the sprinklers hadn't been activated and pulled off Zeus's wet outer clothing. He wiped the water off Zeus's blistered body, then listened to Zeus's chest and started CPR. Zeus suddenly gasped for air, then screamed with pain.

"Abi!" Jack shouted. "I need you."

Abigail had regained consciousness just in time. She slid down the pipe and ran to Zeus's side, putting both of her hands on him.

"That was crazy brave," Jack said to Zeus. "Crazy brave."

Zeus was barely conscious and didn't respond.

I turned to McKenna. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, water dripping from her face. Her lips were pink again. "I'm okay."

"Good, because we've got to go."

We both slid down the pipe to the wet floor, which was layered with the bodies of dead rats. The carcasses squished beneath our feet. Taylor had already jumped down, and I crossed the hall and helped my mother to the ground. She was trembling with fear.

"Come on, Mom. We know a way out."

She didn't speak, but leaned into me.

"Everyone after Ian!" I shouted. I purposely didn't mention the air duct. Zeus may have blown out most of the hall cameras, but I was guessing the Elgen could still hear us.

Jack lifted Zeus onto his shoulders, and he and Abigail ran down the hall after Ian. When we reached the air vent Ian climbed up the pipe first, pushed out the vent cover, and climbed inside the duct. Then he reached down to help us up. "Come on! Hand him up!"

Jack and Ian lifted Zeus, then Abigail, Wade, and my mother.

Hatch's voice came echoing down the hallway. "Your resourcefulness never ceases to amaze me. But there's no way out. The building is surrounded by hundreds of guards. Give yourself up."

"You're a freak!" I shouted. "Come get your dead rats!"

“Don’t worry, I’ve got plenty more. Guards,” Hatch said softly, emphasizing his confidence, “get them.”

Jack noticed a fire box a few yards down the hall, and he kicked it in and grabbed the ax.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“Whatever comes next.”

A moment later Ian yelled, “Bunch of guards sixty yards up the hall.”

“How many is a bunch?” I asked.

“Thirty? And there’s twice that down the hall, waiting behind the door.”

“Do they have those helmets?” Taylor asked.

“Looks like it,” Ian said. “You can’t help here. Give me your hand.” He lifted her up.

“Your turn, Ostin,” I said.

“After McKenna,” he said.

“Go without me,” McKenna said. “I’ve got an idea. Jack, can you break one of these pipes?”

“I think so.” Jack lifted the ax to the closest water main, then swung at it. The blow only dented the pipe. “Hold on!” he shouted.

He pulled back and hit the pipe again and again. On his fifth strike the ax pierced the pipe and a powerful stream of water shot across the corridor, hitting the opposite wall.

“Here we go,” McKenna said, turning her hands white with heat. She put them into the gushing stream. The water immediately flashed into steam, the sound echoing loudly down the hallway like the blast of a steam engine. The steam made it impossible for everyone but Ian to see.

While McKenna continued to fill the hall with steam, I helped lift Ostin up to Ian; then Jack lifted me up, and I climbed inside the duct, leaving just Jack and McKenna behind. Everyone was still clustered around the vent area.

“Taylor!” I shouted. “Get them to the mechanical room! Hurry!”

“How far down is it?”

“It’s the third vent opening!” Ian shouted. “You should be able to feel the cold of the refrigeration room, it’s just past that!” He turned

back. “Michael, they’re close! Tell McKenna and Jack to get out of there!”

I leaned out through the vent. “McKenna, Jack, you’ve got to come now!”

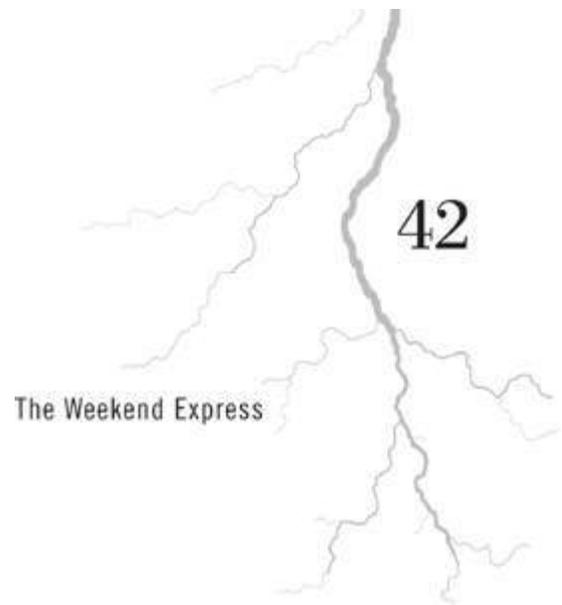
McKenna had cupped her hands in the gushing water and was drinking greedily from its spray.

“Now, McKenna!” Jack shouted.

She ran to the vent. Jack threw down the ax, then lifted McKenna up to me, and I helped pull her in. Then Jack jumped and, doing a chin-up, pulled himself up and in.

Just a few seconds after I’d replaced the vent cover the guards moved past us through the steam, none of them noticing the vent above them.

I breathed out in relief. “Just in time, guys,” I said. “Now let’s get out of here.”



It took us only a few minutes to crawl to the mechanical room, though we had to stop once when a troop of guards ran underneath one of the vents. Wade was ahead of us dragging Zeus, who was still barely conscious. He was the first to reach the vent opening above the mechanical room.

“That’s it!” Ian shouted to him. “It’s clear below. Just Raúl and Tanner!”

Wade pulled off the vent cover. “Hey, guys! It’s us!” he shouted. Then he climbed out, dropping to the concrete floor. Ian helped lower Zeus and Abigail down to Wade and Raúl, then climbed down himself.

Taylor jumped down without anyone’s help—it was easy for a cheerleader—then Jack helped lower my mother, and then climbed out of the vent, lowering himself down slowly. McKenna and I were the last ones out. As I looked around, I saw that Raúl was standing next to the open pipe. Tanner was curled up near the lockers, his shirt pulled over his head.

“Where’s the guard we left in there?” Jack asked Raúl.

Raúl said something to Ostin, who translated. “The guards can be executed for going AWOL, so he’s probably running for his life,”

Ostin said.

I put a hand on my mom's arm. "I know it's crazy, but hang in there. We're going to get home again."

My mother forced a smile. "I know we are. I'm so proud of you, Michael. Your father would be proud of the man you've become."

Her words had a powerful impact on me—powerful enough that I had no idea how to reply. "Thanks," I finally said. "Now let's get out of here." I turned back to the group. "McKenna, you go first so you can light the way."

She looked nervously down into the pipe.

"Is something wrong?" Ostin asked.

"I'm just a little claustrophobic."

"Just look straight ahead," Ostin said. "And think of feathers."

"Feathers?"

"Something soft and relaxing. It will help."

McKenna smiled at him. "Feathers. Thanks." She climbed in.

Next in was Jack, who was carrying Zeus, with Abigail following closely behind, keeping a hand on him always. Raúl, Wade, my mother, Taylor, and Tanner went next.

When she was in the pipe Taylor turned back to me. "Come on."

"Go on," I said. "I'll be right there."

She looked at me nervously but obeyed, leaving just Ian, Ostin, and me. Ian went next. As he was climbing in we heard a short burst of machine gun fire.

"Ian," I said. "How close are they?"

"They're entering the butchery."

His words filled me with fear. We'd run out of time.

"Go!" I shouted. "They need you to make sure it's safe at the other end."

Ian dropped out of sight, and Ostin climbed into the pipe. He slid down the side, then said, "Come on, Michael."

"We're not going to make it," I said.

"What do you mean? We're almost out."

"They could be here any second. The guards know about the pipe. If we just disappear, they're going to figure it out. Then all they need

to do is throw a grenade down the pipe or wait at the other end to catch us. We need time. We need to keep them looking.”

Ostin looked at me with an anxious expression. “I don’t like where this is going,” he said. “What are you thinking?”

“Anacondas,” I said. “Hatch wants me. If he follows me, everyone else can get out. Taylor’s got the GPS, she can get you to the pickup point.”

“You can’t do this,” Ostin said. “If we need a distraction it should be me.”

“Hatch doesn’t care about you.”

Ostin stared at me blankly. There was another burst of machine gun fire, closer this time.

“We don’t have time to debate this. You know I’m right.”

“They’ll catch you.”

“Think, Ostin. It’s the logical choice. This way everyone else gets out and I still have a chance.”

“Dude . . .”

“You know it’s the logical thing! Now get out of here. I’m locking the pipe behind you, so there’s no turning back. I’ll lose the guards, then I’ll join you.”

“But you don’t know where we’re going.”

“Remember plan B. Find me in Cuzco.”

There was a crash just outside the door. My heart froze. “Go! Now!”

Ostin looked at me one last time, and his eyes watered. “Don’t get caught!”

“I don’t plan to. Go!”

Ostin disappeared down into the pipe, the last of McKenna’s light just barely visible behind him. I capped the lid and locked it. Then I pushed some crates around the pipe and laid a chain over its cap. I figured that if one of the guards was familiar with the pipe, he would think we couldn’t have escaped through it.

I gathered grenades from the locker—three concussion and two smoke grenades—then I put my ear to the door. The guards were close, but as far as I could tell, they hadn’t entered the refrigeration room yet. I pulled the pins from both a smoke and a concussion

grenade, threw them into the refrigeration room, then locked the mechanical room door.

The concussion grenade exploded with a loud boom. A minute later I heard the guards enter the refrigeration room, their heavy boots clomping on the concrete floor. As their footsteps came closer to the mechanical room, I hid behind a stack of boxes next to an air duct. When someone tried the door, I pulled down my visor, then set off a smoke grenade, filling the room with smoke.

Just seconds later there was a loud blast as the door blew in. The guards shouted as they blindly stormed the smoke-filled room. I stood up and joined the chaos, my visor pulled down over my face.

“Where are they?” someone shouted.

I pointed up toward the vent. “Look.”

A guard shouted, “They’re in the air shaft!”

“We’ll flush them out,” the captain said. He lifted a communicator from a strap on his chest. “Targets are in the air ducts. I repeat, targets are in the air ducts. Position guards at all vents. We’ll hold at east corridor and send a deuce in.” He replaced the communicator, then pulled out an electronic tablet, summoning up a complete diagram of the Starxource duct system. “Schulz, Berman, go after them. You are only cleared to use RESATs. We’re too close to the bowl for guns.”

“Yes, sir,” the two guards said almost in unison. The first guard stepped on the crate, then jumped up, grabbing both sides of the vent. He lifted himself up with the dexterity of a gymnast. As the second guard stepped up on the crate, the captain said, “Wait.” He took from his utility belt a handheld device that resembled a television remote. “Track them with this.”

He turned it on and the machine immediately started to scream. The captain looked at the reading, then back up with a bewildered expression. He slowly panned the machine the length of the ceiling, then down across the room, stopping at me. For a moment we both stared at each other.

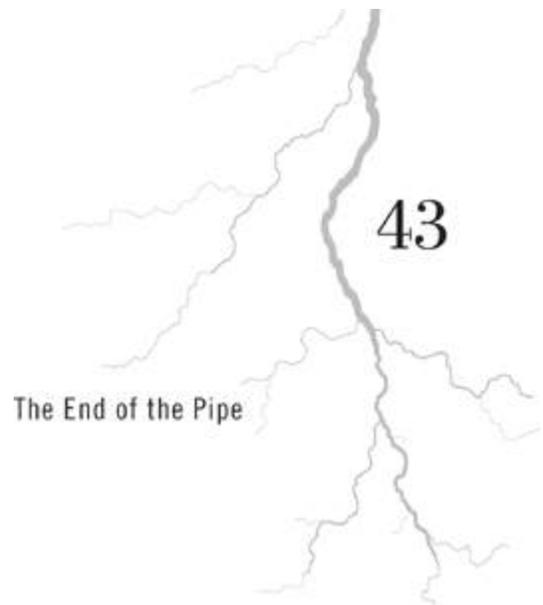
“Gentlemen,” he said, replacing the device in his belt, “the chase is over.” He pulled his helmet off and smiled at me. “Finally we meet, Mr. Vey.”

I produced a lightning ball in each hand and simultaneously threw them in the faces of the guards closest to me, dropping them both to the ground. Then I lunged at the captain as he reached for his RESAT.

I never made it. Two darts hit me in the back, followed by a third, taking my breath away. As I dropped to my knees, three more darts hit me. I think it was three. At least that's as many as I could remember before blacking out.



PART 4



The escape pipe was smooth and sloped slightly, so even at a distance of more than a hundred yards, it was an easy crawl. It reminded Ostin of a slide at a water park.

The end of the pipe was deemed clear by Ian, so McKenna jumped down about five feet to the spongy forest ground below. The ground and foliage beneath the pipe were trampled and littered with cigarette butts, revealing the pipe's steady traffic.

As McKenna looked around, Jack jumped down, then turned and helped Zeus, who was now more conscious, which meant in more pain.

Jack laid Zeus on the ground a few yards from the pipe, then helped Abigail, who immediately knelt down next to Zeus, running her hand over his forehead. She pulled back the shirt they had put on him, revealing second- and third-degree burns over half his body.

"We've got to get him help," Abigail said. "If it gets infected he could die."

"We'll get help," Jack said.

Wade and Raúl helped Mrs. Vey out of the pipe, then Raúl came over and knelt beside Zeus. His forehead creased in concern. "*Sábila*," he said, nodding. "Need *sábila*."

Jack looked at Abigail. "What's *sábila*?"

She shrugged.

"*Sábila*," Raúl said again, lifting his hands in a flourish as if describing what he was saying.

"We'll ask Ostin," Abigail said.

Mrs. Vey was standing next to the pipe's mouth when Taylor climbed out. After Taylor had caught her breath, she put her hand on Mrs. Vey's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Mrs. Vey nodded, even though she was weak and emaciated. "Where's Michael?"

"He'll be here in a second. He's bringing up the rear."

Tanner carefully jumped down, followed by Ian. It was another five minutes before Ostin stuck his head out, panting from the long crawl. He looked around, then scooted on his butt until he was sitting on the rim of the pipe and jumped down.

As Ostin dusted off his knees, Mrs. Vey walked over to the pipe and looked inside. "Where's Michael?"

Taylor also looked inside the pipe. "Michael!" Her voice echoed in the darkness, but there was no response. "Ian, where is he?"

"He was right behind us," Ian said. He looked at the pipe. "He's not there."

"What?" Taylor and Mrs. Vey said in unison.

Ostin looked up with a pained expression. "He didn't come."

Taylor blanched. "What do you mean, he didn't come?"

Everyone's eyes turned to Ostin, who was still catching his breath.

"The guards were too close. Michael stayed back to provide a diversion so we could escape."

Mrs. Vey stared at him in disbelief. "Michael's still inside the compound?"

"He said he had to stay," Ostin said.

"And you let him?" Taylor shouted.

"What was I supposed to do? It was the logical thing to do."

"Logical!" Taylor screamed. She put her hands on the rim of the pipe to climb back in. "I'm going after him."

"It won't do any good," Ostin said. "He locked the pipe after me."

“No!” she shouted, her voice echoing down the pipe. She turned back angrily. “We came all the way here to rescue his mother and you left him behind?”

Ostin swallowed. “I was just—”

“Being stupid?” Jack said fiercely.

“Leave him alone,” McKenna said. “It’s not his fault.”

“Then whose is it?” Taylor said.

“It’s Michael’s,” McKenna said. “He made a choice.”

“I knew I should have waited!” Taylor shouted. She swung around, thrusting her finger in Ostin’s face. “I never would have gone first if I had any idea he was thinking of leaving. We stick together.”

“I’m sorry,” Ostin said.

“Sorry?” Taylor said. “I thought you were smart.”

For a moment no one spoke.

Then Abigail said, “So what are we supposed to do now?”

Ostin said meekly, “Michael said that Taylor has the GPS; she’s supposed to lead us to the pickup site.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Taylor said. “I didn’t come all this way to leave Michael. Do you have any idea what Hatch will do to him if he catches him?” She turned to Ian. “Can you see him?”

Ian looked back for a moment, then said, “He’s with the guards.”

“They’ve captured him?”

“No. He’s standing with them, talking. They must think he’s one of them.”

“He stayed back to cause a diversion so we could get away,” Ostin said. “He said after he led them away he’d sneak back down through the pipe. But he wanted us to hurry toward the pickup site before they figured out how we escaped.”

“I’m not leaving without my son,” Mrs. Vey said.

“And *if* he gets out,” Taylor said, “just how exactly is he supposed to find us?”

“He said he’d go to Cuzco.”

“How? It’s at least a week by foot, with no food or water—if something in the jungle doesn’t kill him first.”

“He’s more powerful than anything in the jungle,” Ostin said.

“Even when he’s sleeping? Or is he supposed to go a week without sleep, too?”

Ian suddenly groaned. “Oh no.”

“What?” Taylor asked.

“They just captured Michael.”

His words stunned everyone. Taylor gasped, and Mrs. Vey sat down on a fallen log and began to cry.

“I’m so sorry,” Ostin said, his eyes filling with tears. “I thought it was the right thing to do. I couldn’t have made him come if I wanted to.”

“Did you even try?” Taylor asked.

“Yes,” he said.

Taylor looked at him in disgust. “I’ll bet. And he thought you were his best friend.”

Ostin hung his head.

“Enough!” McKenna said, walking up to Taylor. “Leave him alone. It’s not his fault.”

Mrs. Vey looked up, her cheeks wet with tears. “She’s right. It’s not Ostin’s fault. Michael would have done this anyway. He would do anything to save his friends.”

“No,” Ostin said, shaking his head. “Taylor’s right. I should have tried harder. I let him down. It’s all my fault.” He put his head down and walked away from the group.

Taylor turned toward him. “Ostin, come back.”

Ostin continued walking off into the jungle until he was out of sight.

“Thanks,” McKenna said angrily, then ran after Ostin.

A haze of despair fell over the group. After a few minutes Jack said, “We’re not leaving him.”

No one answered. The impossibility of saving Michael was obvious to everyone. The silence was broken by Zeus’s groan. Raúl looked at Zeus, then pointed to Jack’s knife. “*Cuchillo.*”

“You want my knife?” Jack asked.

Raúl nodded. “*Por favor.*”

“That means please,” Abigail said.

Jack pulled his knife from its sheath and handed it to him. Raúl took it, then ran off into the forest.

“Where do you think he’s going?” Abigail asked.

“I have no idea,” he said. “But does it matter?”



I awoke buckled tightly to a cot only slightly larger than the one I'd been strapped to in the back of the Elgen truck. There were wires connected to me coming from a white metal box about the size of a deck of cards strapped to my chest. It was a RESAT box, the same device I had pulled off Tanner when we'd freed him. The top of the box had a single knob and several flashing red and green diodes registering its power diffusion. It also had a small antenna, which made me believe my suffering was being controlled by remote. I felt dizzy, and my thoughts were blurred, nearly as hazy as my vision. Above me was a large light fixture, and the light from it blinded and hurt my eyes, making me blink as hard as I ever have, which is probably why I didn't notice Taylor until she spoke.

"Michael."

I squinted, looking up into her face. *I must be dreaming*, I thought.

She leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. "How are you?"

"What are you doing here? You've got to get out, before they catch you."

"It's okay," she said. "We're safe."

My forehead was wet with perspiration. "We're not safe. Pull off these wires. We've got to get out of here."

Taylor just smiled. "Why would I want to escape?"

"What?"

Her smile grew. "I want to tell you a secret." She leaned close to my ear and whispered, "The whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing, it's not real. I made it up to get you down here for Dr. Hatch. I delivered you to him. And in return Dr. Hatch gave me this beautiful diamond bracelet." She dangled the bracelet in front of my face. "You know how we girls love bling. I just thought you'd like to know that." She stood up and walked out of the room.

Tears fell down the sides of my face. *This must be a nightmare*, I told myself.

Ten minutes later someone else walked into the room, stopping at the side of my cot. It was Dr. Hatch. "Welcome back, Michael," he said.

I closed my eyes. I didn't want to look at him.

"You've been crying. So you must have learned the truth about Taylor. Unrequited love always hurts. You didn't really think that a girl as beautiful as Taylor would be interested in someone as pathetic as you, did you?"

I said nothing.

"Not speaking, I see." He slowly exhaled. "No matter." He pulled a stool up to the side of my cot and sat down. "Michael the oath breaker. That's what we call you around here. What do you think of that?"

"I don't care what you call me," I said.

Hatch's voice turned more serious. "How did you get down here?"

I didn't answer.

He grabbed my face, squeezing my cheeks. "I asked you a question."

"I walked."

He let go of me but remained close enough that I could feel his breath on my face. His voice dropped. I knew Hatch well enough to know that that was his way. Most people's voices rise when they're angry. Hatch's voice softened. "Let's try this one," he said slowly. "Where are your friends, Michael?"

I didn't answer.

Hatch waited nearly a full minute before he said, "Oh please. Don't be so cliché with the 'I'm going to be the hero and protect my friends' routine. We both know that I could throw you in Cell 26, our new and improved Peruvian version of your suite in the academy, and get it out of you."

The idea of being sent to the cell sent chills through me, but I also knew that my mother and friends would be back in America before the Elgen broke me.

Hatch leaned forward. "Apart from Taylor, you don't know where your 'friends' are, do you? Maybe they're not really friends. If they were, wouldn't they have tried to rescue you? They haven't, you know. We haven't heard a peep out of them. I'm a little surprised that they deserted you in your hour of need. Aren't you?"

I clenched my jaw.

"Or maybe you just don't want to accept the truth that after all you did for her, even your mother didn't care enough to stick around. That must hurt even more than Taylor's betrayal." His voice fell almost to a whisper. "No one cares about you, Michael. You're all alone in this world."

In spite of the pain, I forced a defiant smile. "They got away," I said, finding relief in his words. "That's all that matters."

Hatch sneered. "Yes, they got away, for now. But that's all right. We'll get them. We'll hunt them down one by one. And in the meantime, we have you. The big kahuna. President of the *electroclam* or whatever ridiculous name you gave your group."

"Electroclan," I said.

"It doesn't matter. The club has been disbanded. But you were worth all the trouble you and your little club caused. At least I thought you were." He reached over to the box on my chest and turned a knob. Increased pain shot through my body, and I groaned out. "Then you went and made things . . . difficult. You changed your destiny for the worse. Only one thing can save you now. Do you want to know what that is?"

I was gritting my teeth with pain. "Yes."

He reached over and turned the knob back down. The pain lessened.

“Humility, Michael. Humility.” He sat back as if giving me time to contemplate his words. “I wonder if you even know what it is? It’s a lost virtue. Kids these days are all swagger. They think they have all the answers. But they’re just a new generation of fools.

“Humility is the wisdom of accepting the truth that you might just be wrong. Unfortunately, for most it comes too late—after the game is lost, if you know what I mean. Humility comes when you’ve hit rock bottom. When your best friends have deserted you. When you have nothing more to lose. Like you. So just put away your arrogant ways and join us, like Taylor did, completely and without reservation, or I have no choice but to dispose of you.”

“You’re not going to kill me,” I said. “You need me.”

“Not exactly,” Hatch said. “We need your DNA, a few pints of blood, and some of your tissue. But we don’t need *you*.” He lingered on the word “you” like it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t have minded keeping you around for a while. I had planned on it. But then you went and ruined the party. Now I have no choice but to make an example of you.

“You see, I have eight very promising and powerful young men and women who I am grooming for future leadership in my organization. These young people are impressionable and they have seen you defy me. If I let that slide, they’ll think I’m soft. Then it’s just a matter of time before one, or all of them, tries the same thing. Not right away of course, these things need time to culture, but, like a virus, dissension will grow.” Hatch’s eyes flashed with anger. “*That* is not an option. They need to know that being special does not mean they’re indispensable.

“So, after our scientists have taken what they need from you, you’re going to help me teach my youths a vital lesson about the importance of obedience and fidelity. And in this way, your worthless little life, which until now has only served to annoy me, will actually do me some good.

“How will I do this, you ask?” He ran his finger up my arm. “I can see from these bites that you’ve had a taste of our rats. Or,” he said darkly, “vice versa. They’re going to get another helping of you. Only this time there will be no one to save you. Do you have any idea how

carnivorous those little things are? I've seen them strip a bull to bones in less than two minutes. I can't imagine the pain, the sheer agony, as a thousand little teeth devour your flesh.

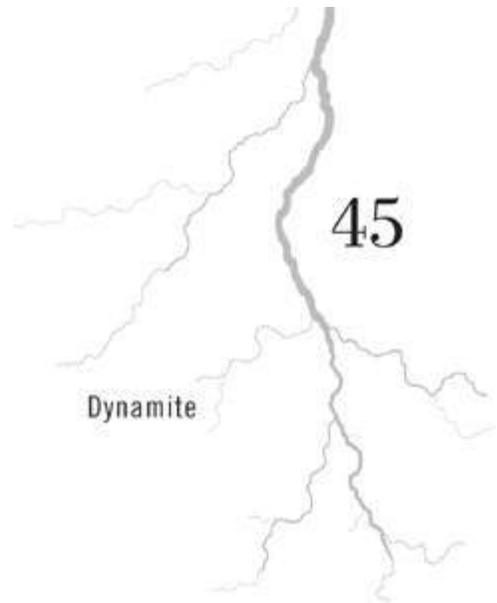
"I'll give you some time to consider your fate, Michael. Can you be humble?" Hatch leaned close to my ear. "Before I go I'd like to confide in you. Parents sometimes say it's the child who stands up to them who they respect the most. I admit there is some truth to this. You have shown tremendous leadership with your little group of miscreants. I'm just sorry it's not going to take you anywhere but the bowl." He stood. "Au revoir, Michael. The next time I see you will be suppertime. Not for you, of course."

"Wait," I said.

Hatch smiled. "Yes?"

"Tell Tara that I know she and Taylor are identical twins, but she's really not as pretty. Sorry."

Hatch scowled at me, then turned and walked out of the room.



Ostin was sitting by himself nearly a hundred yards away from the camp, leaning against a tree. He was drawing in the dirt with a stick, doing mathematical equations, something he did when he was upset. He didn't notice McKenna until she was standing a few yards from him.

"May I sit down?" McKenna asked.

"Free world," Ostin said. "At least until the Elgen take over."

McKenna sat down cross-legged a few feet from him. She picked up a rock and rolled it in her hands. For a long time neither of them spoke.

"They estimate that there are seven and a half trillion trees in the Amazon rain forest," Ostin said. "That one right there is called a strangler fig. The Peruvians call it *matapalo*, the killer tree. It starts when a bird drops its seed up in a tree and the strangler fig grows down to the ground until it chokes out the host tree and takes its place."

"That's interesting," McKenna said. After another moment she said, "It's not your fault, you know."

"I let my best friend down. I wasn't loyal."

"Did you want him to stay?"

He looked up angrily. “No! Of course not.”

“Then you honored his wishes even when you didn’t want to. That’s loyalty, isn’t it?”

Ostin couldn’t answer.

“Taylor doesn’t really think it’s your fault either.”

“You could have fooled me.”

“Sometimes people are like that. When we’re upset at someone and they’re not around, we take it out on whoever is close. Even people we love. Taylor’s afraid for Michael and so she’s upset. And since he isn’t here, she took it out on you. Does that make sense?”

Ostin sighed. “I guess so.”

“The truth is, no matter what anyone said back there, if it wasn’t for you, we’d all still be locked up at the academy. All of us, including Michael.” Ostin looked up to see her gazing at him. “You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met. And you’re smarter than any of us. You’re our only hope of saving Michael.” She looked at him for a moment, then leaned forward, staring him directly in the eyes. “Michael needs you. So stop feeling sorry for yourself and *save* him.”

“You think I can save him?”

“I *know* you can save him. And I know you can save us.” She leaned back.

Ostin stared at the ground for a moment. When he lifted his head his expression had changed. He looked like himself again.

“Let’s break down our situation into its individual components. We’re hiding in a tropical rain forest next to a seemingly impenetrable fortress with two thousand armed guards, huge electric fences, and ubiquitous camera surveillance. Our original way into the compound through the ranch entrance is no longer an option, and our second route was locked off by Michael.

“Our foe seems all-powerful, but if history has taught us anything, it’s that everyone and everything has a weakness—you just have to find it. My weakness is jelly doughnuts. Your weakness is dehydration, or lack of water.” His brow furrowed. “Zeus’s weakness is also water.” Suddenly his face animated. “That’s it!” He clapped his hands together. “That’s their weakness!”

“What?” McKenna asked.

“Water! They built protection around the power plant but not their water source.” He jumped up. “I know how to shut them down.”

“Explain,” McKenna said, smiling at his enthusiasm.

“To power two million homes, their plant would have to create nearly twenty billion kilowatt hours of electricity. That’s twice the energy of a standard nuclear power plant. Given that the Elgen’s power creation is three times more efficient than a steam-turbine system, I’m guessing that the rats are generating heat close to one thousand degrees Fahrenheit. That’s why they built the plant next to a river—without water the bowl would melt down in a matter of minutes. Or even if it didn’t, the heat would kill the rats. No rats, no electricity. No electricity, no lights, no cameras, no electric locks, and no electric fences.” Ostin grabbed McKenna’s hand and pulled her to her feet. “Come on, we’ve got to tell the others.”

* * *

In Ostin’s absence, the group had moved a couple of hundred feet from the pipe to a more concealed location. Everyone was sitting or lying down when Ostin and McKenna rushed into the clearing.

“I know how we can save Michael!” Ostin shouted.

Taylor stood. “How?”

“Everyone gather round,” Ostin said, standing next to Zeus. They formed a crescent around him, McKenna holding on to Ostin’s arm.

“Here’s the gist of it,” Ostin said. “Just north of the compound is the Elgen pump house. That’s where they bring in the water from the river to cool the Starxource plant. It’s outside of the compound. If we blow up the pump house, their grid will heat up to a thousand degrees within minutes. So even if the grid doesn’t melt down, the heat will kill all the rats and still shut down their power. The entire compound is electric, so if they lose their power they lose their cameras, alarms, intercoms, and light. Which means the prisoners can escape.”

“Don’t they have backup power?” Zeus asked.

“They have two backup generators run by diesel,” Ostin said. “But even if they could get their generators up, it would take at least five to

ten minutes to get them online. And they would only create enough power for the compound. The rest of Peru would go dark.”

Suddenly a grin crossed Ostin’s face. “Wait, I’ve got an even better idea. We also blow the generators! All that diesel fuel would create a massive explosion that would set fire to the camp. It will take hundreds of guards to fight it. Between that and all the escaping prisoners, we’ll practically be able to walk in and get Michael.”

“Brilliant,” Ian said.

“But how do we blow the pump house?” Taylor asked.

“Dynamite,” Ostin said.

“Last I checked we’re completely out,” Wade said sardonically.

“Where do we get dynamite?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t know,” Ostin said. “But this is the jungle and jungle people use dynamite for clearing trees and mining. I’m hoping that Raúl knows where to find some.” He looked around. “Where is Raúl?”

“We don’t know,” Abigail said. “No one could understand him. He took Jack’s knife and ran out into the forest.”

Ostin looked puzzled. “Did he say anything?”

Jack looked at Abigail. “Something like saliva.”

Ostin’s brow furrowed. “Saliva?”

Abigail said, “No, it was more like . . . saliba. Salvia. Maybe, sabila.”

“*Sábila*,” Ostin repeated. “Of course. For Zeus.”

“He was looking at Zeus when he said it,” Abigail said.

“He must know where he can find some.”

“Find what?” Jack asked.

“Aloe vera. It’s a cactuslike plant that grows in Peru and is useful for treating burns,” Ostin said. “While we’re waiting for Raúl we need to make our plan. Ian, the generators are on the north side of the plant. There should be some big fuel tanks.”

“I think I see them,” Ian said, standing up and looking toward the compound. “There are two huge tanks aboveground, then a couple dozen oil barrels stacked near them.”

“Can you tell if they’re full?”

“All except two.”

“Perfect,” Ostin said. “So first we set the dynamite at the pump. The generators are going to be trickier because they’re behind the

fence.”

“We could throw the dynamite,” Jack said. “If it’s not too far.”

“It’s not,” Ian said. “But then how do we detonate it?”

“Zeus could do it,” Jack said. “Couldn’t you?”

Zeus nodded weakly. “If I can get there, I can. Back at the academy I used to set off firecrackers all the time.”

“I’ll get you there,” Jack said.

Ostin continued, “While the guards are trying to put out the fire, we’ll blow the pump house. Then the bowl will melt down, the power will go out, and in all the confusion, Ian, McKenna, Taylor, and I will slip in through the east fence to save Michael.”

“Where am I while this is happening?” Jack asked.

“After we blow the pump house, you and Zeus will stay with the rest of the Electroclan. If something goes wrong, you get them to the village. Raúl knows his way through the jungle. In the village he can hide you.”

Jack nodded. “Good plan.”

“When do we do it?” Taylor asked.

“Tomorrow, after dark. It’s also best if we wait until their feeding time—that’s when the bowl will be at its hottest.” Ostin looked at them all. “Are you with me?”

“I’m with you,” McKenna said.

“Me too,” Taylor said.

“I’m in,” Jack said. “So is Wade.”

“It could work,” Ian said. “What do we do first?”

“First thing we need to do is get the dynamite. Let’s just hope Raúl knows where to find some.”

“Let’s just hope Raúl comes back,” Jack said.

* * *

Raúl returned to the camp about a half hour later carrying half a dozen large, dull-green serrated leaves. He set them down on the ground near Zeus, then knelt beside him.

“Yep, aloe vera,” Ostin said. “It’s a natural remedy for burns.”

Zeus looked at the moist leaves fearfully. "It may burn me more," he said.

"Let me try just a little," Ostin said. He took a leaf from Raúl, squeezed some salve from it onto his finger, then lightly touched it to Zeus's skin. There was no electric reaction. "Looks good," Ostin said.

"All right," Zeus said.

Ostin nodded to Raúl. "Okay."

"Okay," Raúl said. He split a leaf, then began applying the salve to Zeus's burned flesh, murmuring something to Ostin as he worked.

"He said this will help," Ostin said.

"Let's hope so," Jack said.

Abigail continued to hold Zeus's hand.

"How are you holding up?" Zeus asked Abigail. She was weary from her constant exertion, but she forced a smile. "Still better than you."

As Raúl worked, Ostin explained his plan, then the two of them had a long discussion. When it was over, Ostin said, "Raúl knows where we can find dynamite. It's about a three-hour walk from here. But he'll need help carrying it."

"Someone's going to carry dynamite for three hours through a slippery jungle?" Wade said. "That sounds like a death wish."

"Wade and I will go," Jack said.

"What?" Wade said.

"Someone's got to do it," Jack said. "We'll do it."

Wade just shook his head.

Raúl handed Jack's knife back to him, then pointed to Jack and Wade and said something.

"He said you should leave a little before sunrise," Ostin said.

Jack nodded. "Sí."

Wade looked distressed. "Great. I won't even get a last meal."

* * *

As darkness fell, Mrs. Vey approached Ostin, who was sketching out a map of the compound in the dirt. "Ostin?"

He looked up. "Yes, Mrs. Vey?"

“It’s really a great plan you came up with.”

Ostin blushed. “Thank you.”

She kissed Ostin on the forehead. “You’re a good friend to Michael. That’s why he loves you so much. And when we get back to Idaho, I’m making you waffles.”

Ostin pumped his fist. “Yes!”

Ostin was still smiling when Taylor approached him a few minutes later.

“Hey,” she said.

Ostin looked up.

“About your idea,” Taylor said. “It’s brilliant.”

“Thanks.”

She took a deep breath. “Look, I’m sorry about what I said earlier. It wasn’t your fault. I was just upset.”

“I know,” Ostin said.

“You do?”

He nodded.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t know that. I mean, you’re so smart about everything except girls. Well, girls and pretty much anything social . . .”

“McKenna explained it to me,” Ostin said.

“Oh,” Taylor said. “I feel awful about what I said about you being a bad friend. You’re not. You’re a great friend.” She looked into his eyes. “Can you forgive me?”

“Yes.”

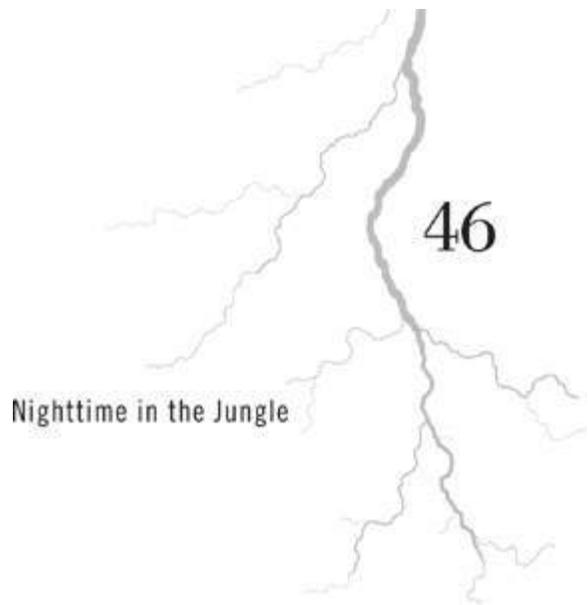
“I know I tease you a lot, but I’m glad we’re friends, too.”

“Really?” Ostin asked.

Taylor nodded. “Really.”

Ostin put out his fist. “Bones?”

Taylor smiled and put out hers. “Bones.”



The group huddled together for the night, sleeping on the dirt. The Amazonian floor receives less than 2 percent of the sunlight, so very little grows, making it soft, like a decaying mulch pile.

The night air was moist and a little too cool for comfort, but they didn't dare make a fire or even let McKenna light herself up for fear that they'd be discovered by an Elgen patrol—it was dangerous enough that most of them glowed naturally.

Everyone was thirsty. Raúl took Ostin with him into the jungle, and when they came back Ostin was holding a tan, tennis-ball-size glob from which he pinched out pieces, rolled them into small balls, and handed them out to everyone.

“What is this?” Taylor said.

“It's gum,” Ostin said. “It will make you less thirsty.”

“Where did you find gum?”

“It's called chicle. It comes from the sap of the sapodilla tree. That's how they make gum.”

“Chicle. Chiclets,” McKenna said.

“*Exacto*,” Ostin said. “That's where it got its name.”

Taylor put some in her mouth and chewed. "It's kind of sweet. But it tastes like gum you've already chewed for ten hours."

"It's tree sap," Ostin said. "What did you expect, Bazooka bubble gum?"

Taylor shrugged. "That would be nice."

* * *

The jungle came alive at night, as noisy and bustling as Times Square. Maybe noisier. As exhausted as he was, Ian volunteered to stand guard. It wasn't as difficult as he thought it would be, as observing the jungle at night was like watching a live presentation of the Discovery Channel. He watched two scorpions, locked in combat, battle to the death. He saw a jaguar climb a tree to catch a monkey, and an entire colony of vampire bats emerge from a rotted tree to seek blood. Everything in the jungle seemed engaged in a life-and-death struggle. Just like them.

No one, outside of Raúl, got much sleep. Between their growing thirst, the symphony of insects, and the continuous assault of mosquitoes, everyone was miserable.

In the middle of the night the sound of thunder rolled across the forest accompanied by the excited chatter of monkeys. Even though they could hear the sound of rain hitting the trees, the thick, lush canopy of leaves kept them dry. Ian found a stream of water rolling down a tree and let it gather in a leaf to drink.

Tanner woke up three times in the night screaming. On the third occasion, Mrs. Vey went to his side and comforted him, gently stroking his forehead. He broke down crying, and she held him, rocking him like a baby.

The only thing that really concerned Ian was when he spotted a guard sneaking back to the pipe. *Isn't he going to be surprised?* Ian thought.

A half hour later, the guard, having found the cap locked, reemerged from the pipe's mouth and ran back in the direction he had come from.

Ian was still awake when Raúl, Jack, and Wade left at the first hint of dawn.

Ostin awoke an hour later covered with mosquito and spider bites. "I can't spend another night here," he said, scratching his arm.

"I know what you mean," Ian said.

"Did Jack and Raúl already leave?"

"And Wade."

"I hope they make it."

"Me too," Ian said. Then added, "It's a jungle out there."

* * *

The three didn't return until late afternoon. They were carrying large, overstuffed packs. Jack had two, one strapped to his front as well as his back, and Raúl was carrying a bag in his hand in addition to his pack. Wade was a physical and emotional wreck and his clothes were soaked through with sweat. He took off his pack and carefully set it on the ground, overjoyed to be free of it.

"You made it," Taylor said to them.

"That was farther than I thought it was," Jack said. "Nice hike."

Taylor turned to Wade. "So how was it?"

"It was a death march," he said. "Nothing like carrying death on your back through a dangerous, death-filled jungle."

"The good thing is that if the dynamite had gone off you'd never even know it," Jack said.

"Comforting," Wade said.

"Well," Taylor said, "if you gotta go, that's the way to go. Oblivious."

"Just like my great-grandfather," Jack said. "He died in his sleep. Much more peacefully than the screaming passengers in the car he was driving."

"You just made that up, didn't you?" Taylor said.

Jack grinned. "Yep." He lifted one of the packs and tossed it to her. It landed on the ground a few feet in front of her.

Taylor jumped back. "What are you doing?"

Jack laughed. "It's not dynamite. I brought back some food and water. Also some gauze for Zeus."

Taylor opened the pack. Inside were a dozen bottles of water, four large, crusted loaves of bread, and green fruits that were slightly smaller than a grapefruit, with the texture of an avocado. She drank some water, then took one of the fruits from the pack.

"What's this?" she asked.

"No idea," Jack said. "He said it was a cherry or something. But it's pretty good."

"Cherimoya," said Raúl, who was eating one a few yards away.

"I'll take your word for it," Taylor said. She grabbed two more bottles of water, three fruits, and a loaf of bread to take to Mrs. Vey and Tanner.

Jack walked around distributing food and water. McKenna was so happy when she saw the water that she started to cry. "Water."

"I got two bottles for you," Jack said. "I know how you need it."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," she said, opening a bottle. "You're my hero."

"I thought I was," Ostin said.

McKenna drank half the bottle, then said, "You still are."

Relieved, Ostin asked, "Are those cherimoyas?"

"Something like that," Jack said, tossing him one. "Is there anything you don't know?"

"The meaning of life," Ostin said. "And how girls think." He peeled back the fruit's glossy green skin and took a bite, juice dribbling down his chin. "Oh man. That's good."

"What does it taste like?" McKenna asked.

"The flavor falls somewhere between strawberry and bubble gum."

"I want one," she said.

"Mark Twain called the cherimoya the most delicious fruit known to man," Ostin said.

"I definitely want one," McKenna said.

Jack handed her a fruit.

"Me too," Ian said. "Toss one this way."

Raúl laughed and said to Ostin, "*Vendes muy bien. Puedes trabajar en el carro de frutas de mi mamá.*"

Ostin laughed.

“What did he say?” McKenna asked.

“He said I’m a good salesman. And I can have a job at his mother’s fruit cart.”

Jack took water and food to Abigail and Zeus. The night before, at the first sound of thunder, Jack and Abigail had carried Zeus into the sloping, deep roots of a kapok tree, then covered him with an additional canopy of brush. Jack handed Abigail a bottle and she took a quick drink, then held it to Zeus’s lips.

Zeus raised his hand. “I can hold it,” he said.

“How are you feeling?” Jack asked.

“I think the aloe vera is helping.”

Jack brought out a crusted loaf of bread and offered it to Abigail. “I brought this.”

She tore off a piece and handed it to Zeus, then took a piece for herself. “I’m so hungry,” she said.

“Try this,” Jack said, handing her a cherimoya.

“What is it?” she asked. “Actually, never mind, I don’t care what it is. I’ll eat anything.”

Jack peeled a fruit for Zeus and handed it to him.

“I’ve had one of these before,” he said. “In Costa Rica. Thanks.”

“No problem,” Jack said.

After the food was gone Jack handed Abigail the gauze. “We should wrap him in this. It will help keep his burns from getting infected.”

“Thank you,” Zeus said. He turned to Abigail. “Could you give Jack and me a moment to talk?”

She looked at him quizzically. “But your pain . . .”

“I can take it for a few minutes. And you need the rest.”

“Okay.” She stood up. “Bye.” She walked over to McKenna.

When she was gone Zeus said to Jack, “Why are you being so nice to me? I shocked you twice.”

Jack grinned. “Yeah, but what did I call you? Lightning stink? I deserved to get shocked.”

Zeus looked at him somberly. “I’m serious. Abi told me what you did in the compound. How you ran through the rats to save me.”

Jack sat down next to Zeus. “Not something I hope to do again soon.”

Zeus just looked at him. “Really, why did you do it?”

Jack didn’t answer immediately, though his expression turned more serious. When he spoke his voice was low and sincere. “We may have our differences—or maybe they’re really our similarities—but anyone who’s willing to sacrifice his life for his friends is a true hero. I’d award you the Medal of Honor if I could.”

For a moment Zeus was speechless. Then he said, “About Abi . . .”

Jack lifted his hand. “We don’t have to talk about her.”

“I know. But if you want a shot at her, I’ll step aside.”

Jack looked down at him. “I don’t think she’s going to be leaving your side anytime soon,” he said. “Besides, that’s not really our choice, is it?”

“I’m just saying, I owe you.”

“No you don’t. But I’d be proud to be your friend.”

“Me too,” Zeus said. They clasped hands and Zeus grimaced a little, hiding his pain.

Jack stood. “I’ll get Abi.”

“Thank you.”

He took a few steps, then turned back. “*Semper Fi.*”

Zeus smiled. “*Semper Fi.*”

* * *

After everyone had eaten, Taylor and Ostin called the group together. Jack and Abigail helped Zeus over, though he insisted on walking himself.

In the center of their camp Ostin had drawn a diagram of the Elgen compound in the dirt, using rocks and leaves to designate buildings.

“This is where we are,” Ostin said, pointing to a spot a few inches from the compound, using a long, slender stick. “And this is where we came from the pipe. Over here, about four hundred yards from us, is the pump house. Earlier today Ian and I sneaked over to take a look at it. Even though it’s outside the compound it’s still within view of the

guard towers, which means we'll have to camouflage ourselves to get to it. Right here is the side where the water is controlled."

"There's also a barbwire fence around it," Ian said. "But it's easy to climb over."

"Or under," Ostin said. "When we blow this thing, it's going to be like a fire hydrant on steroids. We'll be hiding over here behind these rocks when we set off the dynamite. The northeast guard tower is only fifty yards from the pump house and it's equipped with two fifty-caliber Browning machine guns. Those bad boys spit bullets longer than my foot and can pretty much mow down anything in the jungle, so hiding behind a tree won't do much good. Stay clear until the place goes dark."

"I'll explain the next part," Taylor said. "After the sun sets we'll split up into three groups. Ian, McKenna, Ostin, and I are in group one. We'll set the dynamite at the pump house and keep an eye on the bowl. Ian will tell us when it's time to blow the pump and the generators."

"Group two is Jack, Zeus, Abi, and Wade." She looked at Jack. "Your job is to blow the fuel and diesel generators. You won't be able to get close, so you'll have to throw the dynamite, and Zeus will have to set it off. The oil drums are about thirty yards behind the fence. What's the farthest you can hit, Zeus?"

"I can hit them," Zeus said.

"Good," Taylor said. "Ian will be watching for when the bowl is hottest, which is at feeding time. When we tell you, you'll blow the pumps. Ian's been able to confirm that there are eighteen forty-two-gallon drums as well as the tanks connected to the generator. There are fourteen sticks of dynamite in each pack, so you'll each take one pack. Combined with all that oil, that's going to make one big explosion. The generator is only fifty yards from the guard barracks, so with some luck we'll set them on fire as well."

Ostin jumped in. "Diesel puts out a lot of thick smoke, so it will help create confusion and panic, but it has one potential problem—it's not as flammable as gasoline, so it's going to be harder to get this right. Remember, our primary goal is to shut down the generator. So make sure that the dynamite is close to the generator and blows up

the tanks first. Just hitting the barrels might not be enough. Are you clear on that?"

"Got it," Jack said. "Hit the generator and hope the barrels come along for the ride."

"Exactly. As soon as we hear your explosion, we'll blow the pump house. We'll be close enough to lay a fuse, which McKenna will light. Without water the power plant should go down within three to five minutes."

"One question," Zeus said. "How are you going to signal me when it's time to blow our dynamite?"

Taylor looked at Ostin. "We didn't think of that," she said. "Maybe we could do a bird call."

"The guards are closer to you than we are," Jack said. "They'll hear."

Ostin squeezed his chin. "Hmm."

"I have an idea," McKenna said. "Didn't you say there's a barbwire fence outside of the compound?"

"Yes," Ostin said. "But don't worry, it will be easy to get through."

"I'm not worried about that," McKenna said. "How long is the fence?"

"It extends almost the whole length of the north side," Ian said. "How come?"

"What I'm thinking is that Taylor should switch to group two, and then she and Ian could both hold on to the wire. When it's time to blow, Ian just thinks that it's time, then Taylor hears his thoughts and signals Zeus. That way there's no sound or anything that might alert the guards."

Ostin just gaped at her. "That's brilliant."

"Thank you," she said with a slight smile.

"That is a good idea," Taylor said. "So maybe Wade and I should switch places."

Wade nodded. "I'm good with that."

"Then what?" Abigail asked.

"After we've blown the dynamite," Ostin said, "we'll regroup halfway between the pump house and the generator, then Taylor, Ian, McKenna, and I will climb through the fence and rescue Michael. Ian thinks that Michael is being held in the same place Tanner was."

“What about the rest of us?” Mrs. Vey said.

Taylor turned. “You, Tanner, and Raúl are group three. Since you and Tanner are still recovering, we decided it’s best that you get an early start to our meeting point. Raúl will lead you back to where we entered the compound.”

Ostin added, “We left some of Raúl’s friends tied up there and we need to free them.”

Taylor nodded. “After we’ve got Michael, we’ll meet you there, then we’ll all hike together to the pickup point. Sound good?”

Mrs. Vey nodded.

“I almost forgot,” Ostin said, looking at Tanner. “The Elgen have four helicopters. If they put any up, you take them down.”

“With pleasure,” he said. “I hope they come after us.”

“We’re kicking their hive,” Ostin said. “I think you can count on it.”



There was a video monitor in my prison cell that played a continuous loop of the rats at feeding time. The Elgen guards were generally cruel, but I'm sure this was done on Hatch's orders. He would do anything he could to increase my suffering. And he'd enjoy it. I think that deep inside he was sorry he had to kill me, but only because he couldn't do it more than once.

I had been in the cell (in the same cellblock where we had found Tanner) for less than twenty-four hours, but it felt much longer. Security around me was tight, with a guard outside my door and two inside. The truth was, they didn't even need a locked door. Drained of my electricity, I couldn't even leave the cot, let alone my cell.

The RESAT box still fastened to me was like having Nichelle sitting on my chest, drawing out all my energy—only the box was much more powerful than Nichelle was. The only bodily functions that seemed undisturbed by the machine were my tics, which, unfortunately, never seemed to take a break. Especially now. My eyes stung from all my blinking.

Then a thought came to me—a small spark of hope. Maybe the Elgen had locked me up not to keep me in the cell but to keep my friends out. *Maybe my friends are still trying to save me after all.* I had

mixed feelings about this. Of course I wanted to be rescued. I was terrified by what was to come. But, realistically, there was no way they could save me—and the only thing worse than dying would be to watch everyone I loved suffer and die too. I couldn't think about that option. I hoped they had followed my instructions and made it to the pickup site. At least then my death would have mattered for something.

* * *

That morning I had visitors. Tara, Bryan, Quentin, and Torstyn. This time Tara came as herself. I had seen Bryan and Quentin at the academy, but I had seen Torstyn only when Ian pointed him out as we escaped from Re-Ed through the assembly hall.

I knew there were other electric kids, seventeen in all, but Hatch had told me the last four were dead. But here was Torstyn—so Hatch was lying after all.

The guard opened the door, and Tara was the first in, her lip curled in a mocking sneer. “Oh, Michael, you're so cute. I'm so in love with you.” She laughed. “So you're all kissy with my pathetic sister?”

Bryan shook his head. “What an idiot.”

Quentin walked up to my side, his mouth stretched in a confident grin. “You really thought you could take us on? You're delusional, man. You're getting what you deserve.”

I turned away from them. Torstyn grabbed my chin and pulled my head back. “I didn't say you could look away from us. You want me to fry you, lover boy?”

In spite of my weakness I said, “Try.”

The other youths looked at Torstyn, wondering if he would. He just stared at me. “You know I would if Hatch let me.”

“Your master won't let you?” I said. “Maybe he'll let you lick his shoes.”

Torstyn scowled. “Watch your mouth or I'm gonna mess you up, man.”

“Real tough threatening me when I'm locked up. Let me out and you can show everyone how tough you really are.”

Torstyn looked stumped, caught between his ego and his fear of Hatch.

“Don’t worry about it, Torstyn,” Quentin said. “The rats will take care of him.”

“That’s your name?” I said. “Torstyn? They named you after a wrench?”

Torstyn turned red. When he finally spoke he said, “You’re stupid.”

“Wow,” I said. “Is that your superpower? Your brilliant vocabulary?”

Torstyn blushed again.

Quentin intervened. “Hey, Vey, you’re going to love this. We just talked to the dudes at the chute. They said they can slow the conveyor belt, so we can prolong the fun. The rats can eat you a couple of inches at a time.”

“Awesome,” Bryan said. “Wouldn’t it be cool if Dr. Hatch, like, made a game of it and let him run across the bowl? They could even make it a contest. If he gets to the other side and back, he can go free. It would be like dropping a grasshopper on an anthill. We could, like, make bets on how far he gets.”

“Hey, Bryan, wouldn’t it be cool if you had half a brain?” I said. “Did you know these guys all think you’re an idiot? Zeus told me all about it.”

Bryan looked back and forth between them. “No, they don’t. They’re my boys.”

“Really? Is that why Quentin put dog poop in your bed?”

Bryan looked at Quentin. “*You* did that?”

Quentin shoved him. “He’s just messing with your head, man.”

“Yeah, he did it. Zeus watched him.”

Bryan glared at him.

“I didn’t do it,” Quentin said. “That was Tanner.”

“Tanner was in England,” Bryan said.

“I told you,” I said. “They’re always making fun of you behind your back.”

Bryan stormed out of my cell. I turned my attention to Torstyn. “C’mon, tough guy, let me out. Let’s see how tough you are.”

For a moment he looked as if he actually might do it. I didn’t know if I had any chance against him, I didn’t even know what his powers

were, but I figured he couldn't be worse than a million rats.

"He's messing with you, too," Tara said. "Enough of this loser. Let's get out of here."

"You know, your sister is so much cooler than you are," I said. "In Meridian she has like a million friends. I guess beauty really is more than skin deep."

"So are rats," Tara said.

"That doesn't even make sense," I said.

Quentin said, "We thought watching the bulls get eaten was sick. You getting eaten is going to be epic."

"Enjoy it. Your turn's coming soon. Someday Hatch will be feeding you to something," I said.

"That shows how little you know," Quentin said. "Dr. Hatch is like a father to us. He'd never hurt one of us."

"Yeah, Tanner thought that too," I said.

My reply stumped him.

Tara said, "Tanner was a screwup."

"Then you better hope you don't screw up," I said. "Because, father or not, Hatch is afraid of you. Do you know why he's executing me? He told me he's afraid that if he doesn't, one of you will someday take him down."

Suddenly a beeper went off on my RESAT and a wave of pain passed through my body, freezing me. I grimaced. Through clenched teeth I said, "I guess someone doesn't want me telling you the truth."

A guard walked briskly into the room. "It's time to leave," he said. "The prisoner is getting agitated."

"Hatch is getting agitated," I said.

The guard quickly ushered them out. Tara turned back at the door. "Enjoy the bowl."

"You too," I said.

* * *

Hours later Hatch walked into my room wearing his sunglasses. He came to the side of my cot and sat down but didn't say anything.

They hadn't turned down the RESAT, so I was still struggling to breathe.

"Twelve," he said.

The pain dropped immediately—not completely, but enough for me to take a deep breath. I turned toward him.

"It's that easy," Hatch said. "Just one word and the pain goes away."

"I don't think your kids' visit went the way you planned."

Hatch didn't answer, but I saw his jaw tighten.

"I met Torstyn. You said that the other four kids had died."

"Truth is relative."

"Then I'm not dying?"

"You're dying—just not from cancer. You're actually quite healthy, you oath-breaking, insignificant bug." Hatch looked down at his watch. "It's almost time. It's a shame it had to end this way. There are few things sadder in life than squandered opportunity. You could have been great. I could have made you a god."

"You must be dyslexic," I said. "I think you meant to say 'dog.'"

He leaned in close. "In spite of your continual insolence, it's not too late, Michael. One word and I can still save you."

"Why would you want to save an insignificant bug?"

"Don't try me!" Hatch shouted. "I'm giving you a chance at salvation." He calmed himself. "I don't think you've ever really thought this through. You've seen how we live—how our youths live. They have whatever they want. I know you're not the materialistic type, and I honestly admire that. I too am a man of principles. But what principles allow you to watch your mother suffer every day of her life and do nothing about it? There she is, working herself to the bone, just trying to put food on the table, trying to take care of *you*. That's not a life, Michael, that's an existence—and a poor one at that. If you joined us, really joined us, your mother wouldn't have to work another day for the rest of her life. She could see the world, dine at fancy restaurants, drive a new car, wear nice clothing, live in a beautiful home. Doesn't she deserve that? Don't you want that for her? Don't you love her enough to give that to her?"

"My mother deserves everything you just said," I replied. "But there's more to life than things."

“Of course there is. There’s happiness. And is she happy?”

“Most of the time,” I said.

“She acts that way for you, Michael. Because she loves you. Don’t you love her? Wouldn’t she be happier without all the stress and worry? Be honest, Michael.”

“Not at the price you’re asking.”

“What price?” he said. “My offer to you is free.”

“Nothing is free,” I said. “The price is my allegiance to you.”

“And is that too much to ask? You will never be raised higher than when you are kneeling to me.”

I lay there quietly for a moment, then said, “I’d rather kneel to a rat.”

His expression turned to rage. “So you shall,” he said. “You fool. Again I have offered you the world and you spit it back at me.” He looked up at a camera and said, “Make it twenty.”

Immediately the RESAT buzzed, and pain racked my body. I gasped, my eyes welling up from the pain.

“It’s time,” Hatch said to the guard. “Take him to the chute.” He turned back to me, leaning in close enough that I could feel his breath. “You have no idea how much I’m going to enjoy this.” He stood and walked away.

Immediately the two guards were by my side. They checked my shackles and wires, pulled out my IV, and unplugged my RESAT from the wall.

Two more guards walked in. One came behind my cot, knelt down, and unlocked the wheels on my gurney; the other pulled out a plastic handle from the front and pulled me forward. The two guards who were already in the room walked behind the bed until I was outside the cell door, then they came to my side and walked in formation, slowly and at attention, like a color guard. I was wheeled from my cell through a long, concrete-floored corridor with tiled walls.

I had a flashback to the time I was seven years old and was taken to the hospital to have my tonsils removed, my mother and father had walked next to me as I was wheeled to the operating room. I found out later that I had shocked the doctor while he was operating.

Why am I thinking about this? Maybe that's what the mind does when it can't face its own reality—it searches for another one. It was safer to be seven again.

I was in such excruciating pain that everything seemed nightmarishly unreal. The walls blurred past me, partially hidden by the guards, who moved without a word, steady and emotionless like robots, their heavy boots echoing through the hallway. We stopped, waited for a double set of doors to open, then entered a different room with high ceilings. *I've been here before*, I thought. I heard Spanish being spoken in whispers, and above me I could see the curve of the bowl. I was in the ranch entrance, the room where we had entered the power plant. Of course I was. They were taking me to the lift Raúl had shown us, where they brought the bulls to feed to the rats.

Time was running out. If I was going to escape it had to be now. I had to think of something—but even thinking seemed impossible. My mind felt like it was on a long string, like a kite, floating away from me, connected by nothing but a quivering line. I was helpless. I couldn't think. I couldn't move. I was going to die.

The cart stopped, and the guards lifted my bed and set it on the lift. I must have blacked out from pain for a few seconds because the next thing I knew I was already high up in the air, approaching an open trapdoor in the ceiling.

This was it. Doubt began to creep in. Hatch's words returned to me, mocking me. *Where are your friends now, Michael?* Was he right? Had they deserted me? I fought Hatch's lies. *I had left them.* I had locked the pipe behind me. Of course they would have come for me if I hadn't made it impossible. I had told them to run, to escape. If they didn't try to save me, it was my fault, not theirs.

The lift stopped abruptly. I tried to look around, but I could barely move my head. I was in a dark room lit by dim, amber lights flickering like candles. There were people there. Guards? Ranchers? No. They were dressed all in black like the guards, but they were executioners.

Thoughts of my loved ones came flooding into my mind: Taylor and her beautiful eyes. I wondered if they would cry for me. I thought about Ostin and the time he blew up his parents' new microwave

because he was sure he could create cold fusion in a Tupperware container.

Mostly, I thought of my mother. I had read somewhere that grown men, dying on the battlefield, cried out for their mothers. I understood that. I wanted to be with her again. At least she was safe, I told myself. Tears fell down both sides of my cheeks.

The executioners were methodical and quiet, not even speaking among themselves. I was grateful for this. The Elgen guards would have mocked me. They would have laughed at my tears, then slapped me a few more times before sending me off to my end. Perhaps the executioners had seen too much death. There were two, maybe three in the room. I couldn't see their faces. Were they wearing hoods? It was hard to tell. Whatever they wore over their faces was stiff and resembled a mask. They all wore the same disguise, making them anonymous. *Do they feel anonymous? Are they wearing their masks for me or for themselves?*

I was unstrapped from the cot, lifted, and set on a conveyor belt. A strap, made from the same rubberized material that my shackles were, was pulled around my chest, next to the RESAT, and my bound wrists were lifted and buckled to it.

Is Ian watching me? Or were they already on their way back to America? Part of me felt relief that I wouldn't have to fight anymore. The fight was theirs now. I had given all I could.

An executioner turned a knob on the RESAT, and I groaned as my body convulsed with more pain. At first I thought he had done this out of cruelty, but as my thoughts became more blurred I realized that he was probably acting in mercy, dulling me to the impending agony of being eaten alive.

Alive. I was too young to die! I wanted to live and fall in love and someday have children of my own. I had wondered if they would be electric too. My Tourette's could be passed on, why not my electricity? And what if I married Taylor? Would our children possess multiple powers?

What if. What if I had just gone with them? Maybe we could have made it. Maybe we would all be together. Or maybe we would all be

together in here. There was no use second-guessing what I couldn't know. I had made my decision. What was done was done.

One of the executioners began spraying something on me from a hose, soaking my clothing and skin. *What is this? It smells sweet.*

There was suddenly a loud beep like the sound a garbage truck makes when it's backing up. From its echo I guessed it was coming from the bowl itself. I didn't think about its meaning, as I was certain it had something to do with feeding time. A thin, tinny voice from an intercom spoke to the executioners. I couldn't understand what was said, nor did I try. One of the executioners grunted a response then pushed a button. A loud, stoic, female voice began counting down from ten.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven . . ."

My executioners put on earphones. "Five, four, three . . ."

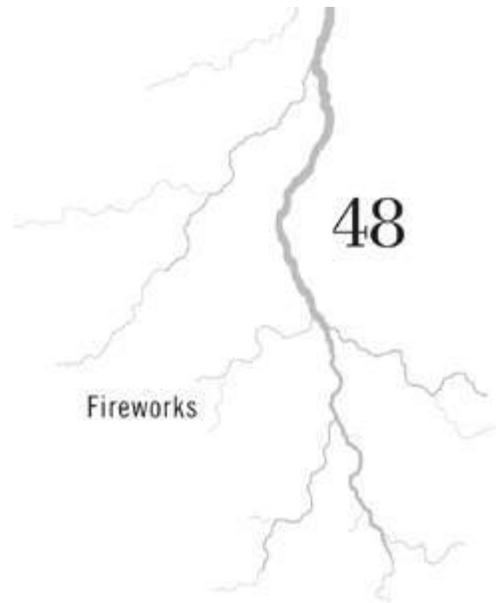
On the wall ahead of me, near my feet, a door slid open and the color of the room immediately changed, lit by an amber glow like the flickering of a fire. The rats. They were waiting.

"Two, one. Commence feeding."

The beeping suddenly stopped, replaced by a single long tone. There was no rescue coming. I had run out of time.

A light above me began to flash, then the conveyor started to move beneath me. My heart froze. "No . . .," I said.

I was so weak. There was nothing I could do but wait. At least it wouldn't take long. Soon everything would be over.



The hours waiting for nighttime passed quietly. The bread, water, and fruit were long gone, and everyone was thirsty, tired, and hungry. As darkness fell over the jungle Ostin gathered everyone together to review the plan one more time. Just sitting together in the darkness already revealed a flaw in their plan. “The guards in the towers are going to see your glow,” Ostin said. “They’ll shoot you through the trees.”

“Easy fix,” Taylor said. “Everyone who’s electric follow me.” She led them over to a spot near the edge of their camp where the ground was still wet from the rain the night before. She scooped up a handful of moist dirt and rubbed it over her hands and face. With the exception of Zeus, the rest of them covered one another with the dark soil. Jack and Wade said they were rubbing mud on for solidarity, but the truth was they loved the commando look.

As soon as the last of the light had vanished, they said a quick good-bye to Mrs. Vey, Tanner, and Raúl, then set off through the jungle in single file, Ian and Taylor leading the group. Zeus slowed their pace considerably. He was finally walking on his own, but he had to lean heavily on Jack. Had they not needed his power they would

have sent him off with Raúl. Wade, Ostin, and McKenna walked at the rear of the column, carrying the dynamite.

They traveled east in an ellipse, making a wide swing into the jungle to avoid being spotted by the tower guards at the northeast corner of the interior fence. When they were past the compound they circled back in, crouching at the perimeter of the barbwire fence just thirty-five yards from the pump house.

The pump house was a simple adobe-brick structure with a tin roof and barred windows. A large pipe, nearly three feet in diameter, was visible on the east side of the structure. It rose up from the ground forming a loop.

“There it is,” Ostin whispered. He turned to Taylor. “Is group two ready?”

“Ready,” Taylor said.

“We’re ready,” Jack said.

Ostin looked at Zeus. “You okay?”

He was clearly still in a lot of pain but nodded. “Let’s shut them down.”

“We should test the wire,” Taylor said.

“Good idea,” Ian said. He and Taylor grabbed the barbwire about six feet apart.

“What number am I thinking of?” Ian asked.

“You’re not,” Taylor said. “You’re thinking about that fruit.”

“It works,” Ian said, releasing the wire.

“All right,” Ostin said. “See you after the fireworks. Good luck, everyone.”

* * *

While Taylor led group two back into the jungle, Ostin, Wade, McKenna, and Ian covered themselves with branches, then crawled on their stomachs under the barbwire closer to the pump house. Ian and Wade carried the dynamite on their backs but had to take their packs off to slide them through the fence. They all stopped about fifteen yards from the house.

“What’s going on in there?” Ostin asked Ian.

“There’s a guy sitting at a console.”

“Just one guy?”

“Yes.”

“Is he armed?”

“No. He looks more like a tech.” He turned back. “He looks like he’s sleeping.”

“He’s about to get the wake-up call of his life,” Ostin said. “What else do you see?”

“The right side of the house is nothing, just a kitchen and bathroom. On the other side there’s the end of that pipe with a bunch of lights and switches.”

“How thick is the pipe?”

“About three feet.”

“I mean the walls of the pipe.”

“Oh.” He looked closer. “Maybe an inch and a half.”

Ostin thought this over. “Dynamite blows down, so we should put the packs on top of the pipe, but it’s much more powerful in a confined space.” He did the math in his head. “For maximum explosive effect we need to stack the packs *inside* the loop.”

Ian and Wade pulled a coil of fuse out of each pack, and McKenna wrapped the ends of the fuse around her hand.

Ostin looked at McKenna. “You don’t ever just spontaneously ignite, do you?”

“Only a few times a day,” McKenna said, staring ahead.

“Really?”

She looked at him. “No.”

“Sorry,” he said.

Wade turned to Ostin. “Now?”

“Do it,” Ostin said. “Don’t forget to check the fuses.”

“I won’t.” Wade slid his arms through both packs, then McKenna and Ostin covered them with brush.

“Good luck,” Ostin said.

Wade crawled on his stomach toward the pipe, moving about as fast as a turtle. In the darkness he looked like a slow-moving bush.

“Can’t he go faster?” McKenna said.

“He’s just being careful,” Ostin said. “We’ve got one shot at this.”

When Wade reached the pipe he looked back at Ian, who gave him the thumbs-up. Wade checked the fuse connections again, then placed the packs in between the looped pipe and crawled back, though much faster. The four of them dropped back into the jungle, McKenna feeding the fuse out from her hand as they went.

“How’s our sleeper?” Ostin asked Ian.

“Still snoozing.”

“Good. Have you found Michael?”

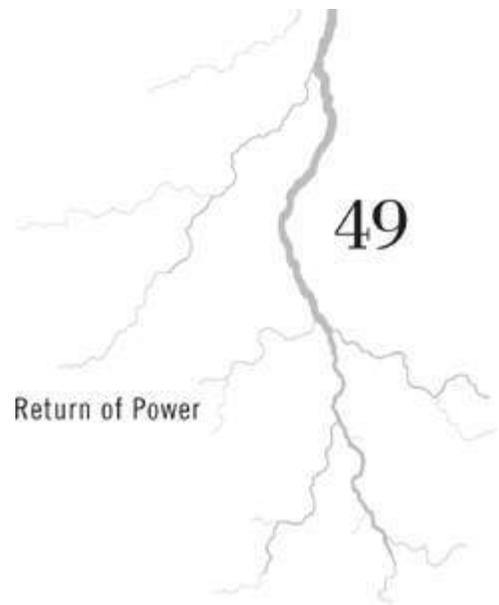
“No. He’s not in the cells anymore.”

“What’s going on in the bowl?”

Ian strained. “It’s hard to see with all the electrical interference. But something must be going on. There’s a large crowd gathered up in the observation deck. The chute’s extended, so it must be feeding time.” He shook his head. “That’s strange, I don’t see a bull. Let me see what’s in the feeding station.” His expression changed. He quickly grabbed the barbwire. “We’ve got to blow it. Now!”

“What’s going on?” Ostin asked. “What’s in the feeding station?”

“Michael.”



The conveyor belt moved me slowly toward the open door leading to the bowl. As I approached the opening I was overcome by the shrill scream of a million rats echoing in the metal collector—far louder and more horrific than the sound of the rats in the hallway. I can't describe the terror of that sound, though I had once heard something like it. A few years earlier Ostin played for me something he had downloaded from the Internet—a radio program claiming that Russian scientists conducting deep-hole drilling experiments in Siberia had recorded the sounds of hell. The recording was proven a hoax, but if there was such a place as hell, it couldn't be worse than this—the shrieking of a million hungry rats climbing on top of one another to eat me alive. Even the stench was torture, and I started gagging.

The belt moved slowly, like a roller coaster about to take its first plunge. My heart raced, fueled by adrenaline. My mind and my body felt numb. I wished I could pass out.

Then I felt something else. As my feet cleared the door, they began to tingle. Powerfully. As I slowly passed through the opening in the wall the sensation moved up my body. *What's happening to me?* To my surprise I was able to lift my feet. It felt like energy was washing over

me. Of course it did. I was being carried out over the largest electrical field ever created—millions of kilowatts were bombarding my body. The RESAT that had been sucking the energy from me couldn't possibly handle that much current. A thousand of them couldn't.

As my chest approached the opening I was able to sit up and look down. My feet were beginning to glow. What I saw past my feet, at the bottom of the chute, was horrific. Until you see the rats you can't possibly imagine how terrible they look, bubbling like a vast sea of lava. At the sight of me, the rats' ravenous, collective shriek grew in intensity, and I could see a wave of rodents swelling toward me.

My thighs were now glowing. I strained at my bonds. I couldn't break free yet, but I was still absorbing electricity. My head passed through the opening, and I was looking directly down the chute, lying on the metal rollers. This is where I was supposed to roll down. I waited for it, but I didn't move. I wasn't sliding anywhere. Of course I wasn't. These were metal rollers and I was magnetic again, only a hundred times more.

The RESAT started to make a high-pitched squeal, then popped as it blew, a thin wisp of smoke rising from it. My skin was now as bright as an incandescent lightbulb. I was just lying there on the chute, a few yards past the trap door, immovable and growing brighter by the second, brighter than I had ever experienced. I looked down at my feet, but they were now too bright to look at. I wasn't melting through my bands; my bands were just gone. I lifted the RESAT from my chest and threw it down at the grid.

I could hear shouting coming from the intercom in the execution room. Then the chute began to lower. I guessed that if I wasn't going to the rats, they were going to bring the rats to me. The trapdoor shut behind me, and the chute continued lowering until it was within a few feet of the grid. The ravenous rats began jumping onto the chute, pouring up the trough like a flash flood in reverse.

I had been covered by the rats before—in the hallway—but I hadn't felt this way then. The bowl was designed to collect and focus energy toward a collector, and I had become the center of that focus, channeling the pure energy of a million rats.

The first rats didn't come within six feet of me before they burned up like meteors entering the Earth's atmosphere. I was becoming even more electric. I *was* lightning. I was *pure energy*. Then I wasn't burning the rats anymore; I was vaporizing them. For the first time, I felt more electric than human. I wondered if I would vaporize too.

As the metal rollers began to glow beneath me, I slowly stood and walked, on an incline, down the chute, my feet clinging to the metal. The rats began running from me, scrambling as if they were fleeing a burning ship. I walked to the end of the chute, then stepped down onto the grid.

I looked up at the observation window. Hatch was pressed against the glass. Even with his glasses on I could see his astonishment. Standing next to him were his kids: Tara, Quentin, Torstyn, Bryan, and Kylee, with at least a dozen guards at attention behind them. I stepped over the sweep and walked closer to the observation window so I could observe them.

I formed a brilliant ball of electricity in my hand and threw it right at Hatch. Hatch, and everybody else, dove out of the way as the ball exploded against the thick glass, blasting a hole in it large enough for my mom's car to drive through. When the smoke cleared, only Torstyn's head popped up. I formed another ball in my hand.

"Hey, tough guy!" I shouted. "Want to play ball?"

He ran.

I noticed that the sound the rats were making had begun to change. I turned to see the rodents pressed up against the opposite side of the bowl. Thousands of them were on their backs, twitching. A loud alarm sounded. That's when I noticed that the color of the bowl was also changing. The bowl was heating up. Even in my state, I could feel its heat. All around me, rats were dying by the thousands. *Am I doing this?* Then the rats began to burst into flames, like stuffed animals thrown into a furnace. A robotic female voice echoed across the bowl: "Danger. Evacuation protocol. Bowl meltdown imminent."

I didn't want to stick around to see what that might look like. I ran to the side of the bowl and jumped across a three-foot trough, magnetically sticking to the bowl's metal side.

That's when the power went out.



Everything stilled. A dying alarm echoed across the bowl, and the only light came from me and the burning carcasses of rats. I slowly lowered myself down the metal side, below the grid. I was free, at least for the time being, but I wasn't sure how to get from where I was to the mechanical closet.

Michael?

The voice sounded as if it had come from someone standing next to me. It sounded like Taylor's. I looked around but couldn't see anyone.

Taylor?

Good, you hear me! she said.

I realized that I wasn't hearing a voice but thoughts.

Where are you? I asked.

I'm outside the building. Are you touching the bowl?

Yes.

Me too. You're reading my thoughts.

Where is everyone?

In the jungle.

Is everyone okay? Is my mother?

She's fine. Raúl took her and Tanner to our rendezvous point, where the bull got caught in the fence.

The power's out. The bowl melted down.

I know. We blew up their water supply so the bowl would melt down.

Ostin's idea?

Of course. How are you getting out? Taylor asked.

The pipe. If I can find it. Is Ian around?

Yes.

Ask him how I get to the pipe.

Just a minute. Ian, how does Michael get to the pipe?

Tell him to climb down to the ground below and go right to the first door. That hallway will take him back to the air duct we crawled through. Did you hear that, Michael?

(It's a little weird listening to someone's thoughts when they're listening to someone else speak, almost like an echo.) *Yes. I'll lose contact with you when I drop down from the bowl. I'll meet you at the rendezvous point.*

We'll see you there. I'll see you soon.

I couldn't help but smile. I'll see you soon.

I climbed down the sloping metal of the bowl as far as I could, which wasn't far enough, as there was still a twelve-foot drop to the dark ground below—the floor barely illuminated by my glow. I let go, dropping hard to the concrete.

"My ankle," I groaned. I looked down at my foot. My right foot had landed on a wrench and twisted as I hit. As I stood, a shock of pain shot through my ankle. It felt like a sprain. I limped along the wall until I found the door Ian had told me about and opened it to the corridor we'd escaped from. The hall had some illumination, as the battery-powered emergency lights had been activated. I looked both ways, then hobbled out into the hall.

I could hear running, heavy Elgen boots, but it was coming from somewhere else in the maze. I limped down the hall until I found the vent cover. I climbed the water pipe next to it into the duct, then replaced the cover behind me.

My glow had increased tenfold, illuminating the duct almost as brightly as McKenna had. I crawled as quickly as I could until I felt the cold of the refrigeration room. I crawled slowly to the next vent and put my ear to it. I could hear movement. Then I saw the beam of

a flashlight. There was someone in the mechanical room. I pulled back, afraid that they might notice my glow through the vent, but the sound didn't stop. I crept up and looked out the vent again. There was a guard below. He was in uniform, standing near the pipe. I couldn't tell if he was coming or going. He lifted the cap off the pipe and dropped his flashlight in, answering my question. He was escaping too.

I gave him time to disappear down the pipe, then I removed the vent cover. I looked around and then climbed out, lowering myself as much as possible, then dropped to the floor, trying to absorb as much of the fall as I could on my good foot. I hobbled over to the pipe and lifted the cap. I could hear the echo of the guard moving inside. I put both hands on the pipe and pulsed, knocking the guard out. I climbed into the pipe, then slid down, crawling out of the compound as fast as I could.



I caught up to the unconscious guard just a hundred feet from the pipe's entrance. I took his weapons, mostly so he couldn't use them on me. He was carrying the standard Elgen weaponry and ordnance: a concussion grenade, a smoke grenade, a special ops knife, and a 9mm pistol. I took everything, including his flashlight. Then I cuffed his hands behind his back. I didn't want him following me. I wondered how many other guards were taking the opportunity to escape.

I hurried on as fast as I could, wondering how the rest of the Electroclan were doing. They had just shut down the Elgen's largest power plant and blackened out the country's largest cities. I could only imagine how angry Hatch was. He would spare nothing to catch us before we left the country. He would be out for blood.

As I neared the end of the pipe, I saw something move. I pointed the flashlight toward the pipe's mouth. A brightly colored snake was slithering toward me. I didn't know what kind of serpent it was, but Ostin always said that when it came to snakes the rule of thumb is "the more pretty, the more dangerous." I think he said the same thing about girls.

Even though I could feel my power returning to its normal levels, whatever that meant these days, I was still carrying excess electricity from the grid. I produced a brilliant, softball-size lightning ball and tossed it at the snake. The ball exploded in a bright flash, and even though I missed the snake by at least a foot, the ball still burned it to charcoal. I crawled past it to the end of the pipe.

I shone my flashlight around but could see nothing, so I let myself down. My ankle was swelling now and too painful to put much pressure on. Using the knife I'd just confiscated I cut away part of my shirt, then wrapped my ankle with it. I looked back at the compound. I could hear shouting and an occasional gunshot but no machinery of any kind. There were no electric lights, but in the moonlight I could see a column of smoke rising from behind the power plant. My Electroclan had wreaked some serious chaos. I was so proud of them.

I knew it would be just a matter of time before the Elgen came looking for me outside the compound. I had to get to the meeting point as quickly as possible. Forgetting my ankle, I started to run and nearly fell. I didn't want my friends to have to wait for me. But they were traveling with wounded as well, so I might not hold them back too much.

I hurried on, concealed in the darkness of the jungle but close enough to keep my eye on the fence for navigation. The last thing I wanted to do was get lost in the jungle. I was glad I had given Taylor the GPS. At least I didn't have to worry about everyone else getting lost.

I had limped along for about a half hour when I heard the sound of approaching helicopters. As they got closer I heard another noise that I couldn't distinguish until I saw the fire. The helicopters were burning the forest with flamethrowers.

In spite of my pain, I started moving faster, heading deeper into the jungle. But they kept coming as if they knew exactly where I was. *How did they find me?* Then I remembered the el-readers, like the handheld one they had caught me with in the mechanical room. With the Elgen's love for technology I had no doubt that they had developed bigger, more powerful el-readers that had a range of hundreds of yards.

The sound of the rotors just got louder, and it didn't matter how deep I was in the jungle, how dark the night, or how thick the canopy, they were clearly following me. Then I heard the blast of the flames again, this time followed by the screeching of birds and monkeys. A black jaguar ran past me.

Thirty feet in front of me was an orange-yellow wall of fire, taking out everything in its path and clearing a smoldering swath in the jungle nearly twenty feet wide. Then I heard the blast of a flamethrower behind me as well.

Huddled in the trees, I couldn't tell how many helicopters there were—at least three. They were flying in circles around me, cutting back the jungle with their flames—the circle closing in on me until the heat was intense enough that it was hard to breathe. They didn't have to burn me—they could just suck all the oxygen out of the area and suffocate me. Smoke and fumes stung my eyes and throat and I was covered with ash. Within minutes they had left me in a small circle of trees, an island in an inferno of fire and soot. Then one of the helicopters broke off and hovered directly over me. A voice boomed out from its amplifier.

“You can't escape, Vey. We have you surrounded. If you run we'll open fire. You have five seconds to step out from the canopy or we'll burn you alive.”

I said nothing, weighing my chances of running through the charred and burning swath to the jungle beyond without getting mowed down by their machine guns. But really, there was no point to it. They'd just find me again.

“One. Two . . .”

“Okay!” I shouted. “I'm coming out.”

I limped out into the smoldering black clearing, my arms raised, my body illuminated by their spotlights. There were four helicopters, bobbing above me in the night like they were on strings. One was directly over me, maybe just fifty feet above the tops of the trees, another was to my left, and the other two were slowly circling, their spotlights and machine guns all pointing at me.

The voice said, “Get on your knees.”

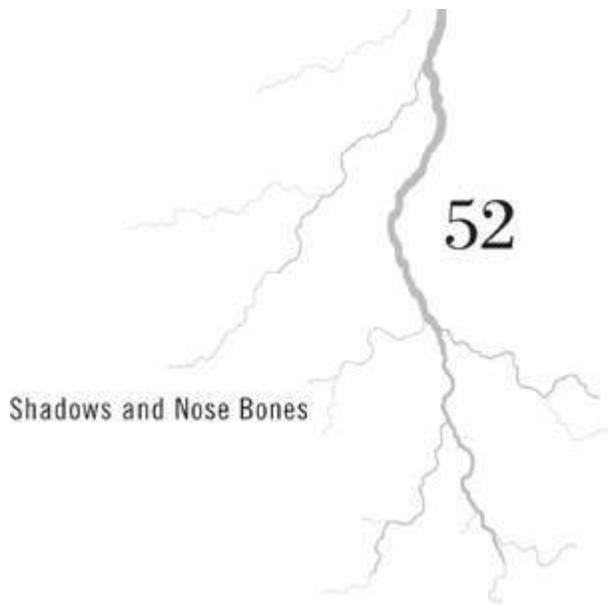
I looked at the steaming ground, then slowly knelt down.

The helicopter to my left began to descend when it suddenly started to wobble. It yawed violently to one side, veering directly into the path of another helicopter. Their blades collided and both helicopters exploded.

Then the third and fourth helicopters dropped to the ground. I sprang to my feet and, ignoring the pain in my ankle, sprinted out of the way as one of the helicopters fell just twenty yards from where I had been kneeling and burst into flames.

I looked back only once to see the clearing completely engulfed in fire, then ran headlong into the jungle as fast as I could.

“Wherever you are, Tanner,” I said, “thank you.”



My friends are close. Close enough at least to drop the helicopters. Not that that knowledge did me much good. I was utterly lost. In fleeing the helicopters I had run even deeper into the jungle. I had no idea how far I was from the meeting point or even what direction to walk in. If I were Ostin I could look at the stars and figure it out, but I wasn't Ostin and, even if I were, under the thick canopy, I couldn't even see the stars. I had to somehow find my bearings. If I could get above the canopy I could find the compound and head back toward the fence. My ankle was throbbing now, and I hopped on one foot until I found a tall, lichen-covered tree hung with vines as thick as rope. I tested one of the larger vines, and it easily held me, so I began to climb.

I was tired and weak and the climbing was difficult, but I continued on, knowing that the Electroclan was nearby. Monkeys and birds screeched around me as I invaded their domain. A black-and-white monkey about the size of a squirrel jumped on my head. It started pulling at my ears so I pulsed a little, and it shrieked and jumped off, scolding me as it swung to a nearby limb.

It took me about a half hour to make it to the emergent level above the canopy. I was panting and drenched with sweat, but the air was

cooler and fresh and I sucked it in like water. The velvet night sky was brilliant with stars and, for the first time since I'd come, I realized that it wasn't the same sky we saw at home. There was no Big or Little Dipper down here, no North Star. In this part of the world they looked to the Southern Cross.

From my vantage point I could see for miles around in all directions. I could see the moon reflecting off the river, winding through the jungle like a snake through grass.

On the opposite side of the valley the Elgen compound was still dark, lit only by sporadic fires. Smoke was billowing into the sky. This made me unspeakably happy.

I found the electric fence. Its yellow warning lights were dead but I could see the moon glisten off its metal lines. I had gone farther into the forest than I had thought, and I could now see that I was at least a quarter mile from the fence and a couple of miles from what I guessed to be our meeting place.

As I looked out over the compound I saw them coming. Shadows. They were everywhere. There were more than a thousand of them, silently moving toward the jungle. The guards had been sent out to find us.

I quickly climbed back down below the canopy, afraid that my glow might have given me away. I had no doubt that they were equipped with el-readers and night vision goggles. My optimism vanished, replaced with dread. I couldn't go to our meeting place even if I could find it. The meeting place. My mother was there. Raúl could guide them through the jungle. *Had the rest of the Electroclan already caught up to them? Had Ian seen the Shadows coming?*

A few minutes later I heard something crashing through the foliage below me. As I turned to see what it was, I heard a gunshot and something smashed against the tree less than three feet from my head, splintering wood around me. Then I saw the brilliant green flash of laser pointers on my body. Three Elgen guards had their guns trained on me. "Come down from the tree!" one shouted. "Or we'll shoot you down!"

I had no doubt they would, though I wondered if I would be better off taking the bullet here. Hatch would not be so merciful. But the

rest of the Electroclan was somewhere nearby and they had to have heard the gunshot. They could take out these three. "All right," I said. "I'm coming."

My back was to them as I climbed down the tree. I was afraid. Part of me expected a bullet at any second. When I reached the ground I put my hands in the air and slowly turned around. "Don't shoot."

To my surprise, all three guards were lying facedown on the ground, motionless. I couldn't figure out what had happened. I hadn't heard a thing. I looked around but couldn't see anyone.

I knelt down next to one of the men and saw a small, feathered dart stuck in his neck. I swallowed as I slowly looked up. Just yards away from me, concealed in the darkness, were at least a dozen Amazon tribesmen. The lower halves of their faces were painted bloodred, and the upper halves, just above their noses, were painted black, making them look like they wore masks. They wore simple loincloths and headdresses of freshly plaited leaves, perfect camouflage for the jungle. They were armed with blow darts and spears.

I slowly stood. I had no idea what to do. If they had wanted to kill me, they could have easily done it as I climbed down the tree, just as they had the three Elgen guards. I remembered what Jaime had said about the tribes—that they hated the Elgen. *White devils*, they called them. Maybe the tribesmen were still trying to figure out what I was. If the Elgen were hunting me, maybe they would think I was good. You know, my enemy's enemy is my friend.

One of the natives approached me. His face was painted like the others', and he wore a chest plate made of bamboo laced together with dyed twine and a necklace with jaguar claws and bird talons. There were bones through his nose and ears. He slowly reached out and cautiously touched me, probably intrigued by my glow. For a second it crossed my mind that if I gave him a small shock, he might think I was a god or something, but I decided it was too risky. I had clearly watched too many movies.

He took my hands and crossed them at my wrists, then another one of the natives stepped forward and tied them together with twine. I

could have easily dropped them both, but I was sure that I would answer for it with a dozen poison darts and arrows.

One of them made a peculiar clicking noise with his tongue and the rest began mimicking him, then they started off, leading me deeper into the black jungle. Even in the darkness they knew where they were going. We walked all night. My ankle throbbed with pain, and a few times I had to stop, which was met with a lot of shouting and shoving. It took a great deal of self-control not to shock them.

After hiking for miles through the dense terrain, we finally stopped at a village on a cliff overlooking the river. It was still dark and I guessed it was probably around four in the morning. I was moving on sheer adrenaline.

In spite of the hour, there was a great deal of excitement at my arrival, and even children, about two dozen of them, ran out to look at me. Old, gray-haired men came from their huts, their bodies painted in white and red. The women were also painted and wore layers of bright blue beads around their necks.

From what I could see, the village consisted of about thirty thatch-roofed huts. The tribesmen led me to an elderly man who, from the natives' gestures, I guessed was a person of authority—a chief or shaman. His face was painted white with a few black lines and his gray hair was cut short. He also had a bone through his nose. He wore a necklace made of piranha jaws and a headdress made from brightly colored parrot feathers. He looked me over, touched me, then said, "*Shr ta.*"

His pronouncement was met with a loud whoop from the tribesmen.

"*Pei ta dau fangdz chy. Ma shang,*" the old man said.

"*Ma shang,*" they echoed.

"*Chyu,*" my guard said to me.

"Chew what?" I said. "I don't speak cannibal."

The man grabbed my arm, and I was taken to a small hut and my hands were untied. As I rubbed my wrists the guard said, "*Chyu. Chyu.*" I looked at him blankly, and he pushed me inside the hut. "*Schwei jau,*" he said.

"I don't understand a word you're saying," I said.

He pointed to a large fur on the ground and closed his eyes.
“*Schwei jau.*”

“Sleep,” I said. “I can do that. Gladly.”

I sat down on the fur. The bed was on a dirt floor covered by mats made of woven leaves. It wasn’t any worse than the Elgen’s prison cot. In spite of my fear, I immediately fell asleep.

* * *

At daylight, I opened my eyes to an elderly man with a bone sticking through his nose, staring into my face. I jumped back.

He laughed.

“You think that’s funny?” I said. “How would you like a shock? We’ll see how funny that is.” I was pretty angry, and I felt at ease to speak my mind because I was certain they couldn’t understand me.

The man stared at me for another moment, then he made a clicking noise and left my hut. I sat up on the fur, reminded of my ankle. After last night’s hike it was swollen to almost twice its size. I rubbed it for a minute, then lay back down. My mind was reeling. What was going to happen? My mother used to say, “Better the devil you know than the one you don’t.” I finally understood what she meant. At least, with the Elgen, I knew what they wanted. I had no idea what these people were about. For all I knew I was their main entrée for dinner tonight.

I wondered about my mother and the rest of the Electroclan. Had they made it to the pickup point? Were they still waiting for me? No, they couldn’t be. Not with the guards searching for us.

A few minutes later an older woman walked into my hut. She carried a wooden bowl with something inside that resembled a greenish-brown oatmeal, which she handed to me along with a gourd filled with water. I drank thirstily, then, using my fingers, tried the food in the bowl. It tasted unlike anything I had ever eaten before. It wasn’t all bad and I told myself it was some kind of fruit, but it could have been smashed bug larvae or monkey brains for all I knew. The woman then knelt down by my feet and took my sprained ankle in her hands and began rubbing it. I took this as a good sign, as I doubted

they would spring for massages for people they planned to eat. Or maybe this was just how they tenderized their meat.

Nearly an hour later two young tribesmen came into the hut. I thought I recognized them from the night before, but from the way they were painted, I couldn't tell. They said something to the woman, and she stopped rubbing my ankle and stood. I looked at my ankle. The swelling had gone down considerably. "Thank you," I said to her. The woman didn't look at me as she left but said, "*Buyong she,*" and walked out.

"*Jan chi lai!*" the older of the two shouted at me. I guessed that he was telling me to stand. I lifted myself up, slowly putting weight on my bad foot, testing it. My ankle had improved. Not enough that I could outrun anyone, but I had never considered that an option anyway. In the jungle I was definitely at a disadvantage.

The men escorted me back out into the center of the village. The old man, Mr. Important Guy, was standing in the exact same place he had been the night before. He was waiting for me.

"*Womun dai ta,*" one of the tribesmen said to him.

"*Ta yo mei yo schwei jau,*" the important guy said.

"*Schwei le.*"

"*Yo mei yo ting chi tade ren?*"

"*Mei yo.*"

I listened to them banter for a while, then finally I said, "Listen, if you're going to eat me, you're not going to like the way I taste."

To my surprise the men stopped talking. The old man's face twisted with a peculiar expression, then he started to laugh.

"I'm not your enemy," I said. "I just want to go home."

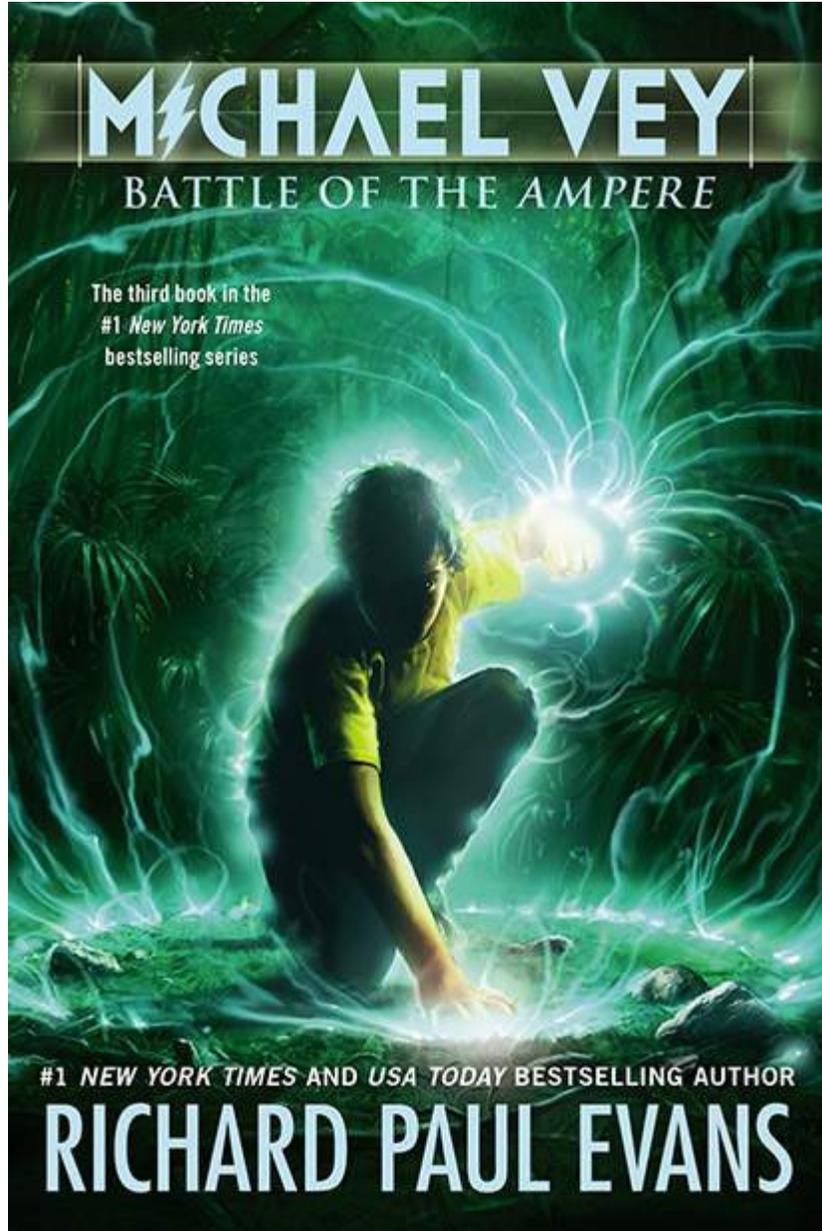
The old man stopped laughing. He looked at me for a long time, his dark gray eyes locked onto mine. Then he said in perfectly clear English, "Michael Vey. That is not your path. You are not going home."

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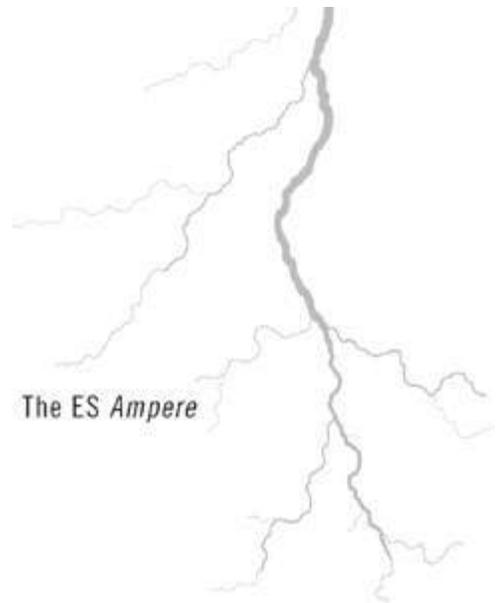


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“A terrorist group? The Shining Path?”

“No, a group called the Electroclan.”

“Michael Vey,” Schema growled. “He’s just a kid.”

“Then he’s a very powerful kid.”

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“No. According to our sources, Mr. Vey’s mother was being held captive in the Peruvian compound. His only objective was to free her. Dr. Hatch apprehended him, but then Vey’s fellow terrorists attacked the compound to free him. The power plant was collateral damage.”

“You’re telling me that we lost billions of dollars as a side effect of a boy looking for his mother?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was Mrs. Vey at the compound?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then Hatch never released Vey’s mother as he was directed.”

“It would appear not.”

The chairman screamed out a long string of profanities, which ended in an equally lengthy fit of coughing. “This is Hatch’s doing! The man’s gone rogue. Has he done anything we told him to? Have the rest of the electric children been released?”

“We don’t believe so.”

“Where was Hatch when all this happened?”

“He was at the compound.”

“And where is he now?”

“He is on his way here—as per your summons.”

“When will he arrive?”

“In about three hours.”

“Alert security. Tell them to prepare the brig. They’ll soon be accommodating a new prisoner.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does Hatch have any of the electric children with him?”

“We don’t know, sir.”

“Then find out!” Schema shouted. “Under no circumstances are you to allow those children aboard this boat. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. What do we do if they’re with him?”

“Turn the helicopter away.”

“If they won’t go?”

“Then blow them out of the air.”

“With the youth aboard?”

“Yes, with the youth aboard! Are you an idiot? Do you have any idea how powerful those children are? They could take over the ship. Under no circumstance do we allow those children on this ship.”

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“Did you think we were going to let him live? He knows *everything*. Hatch will never leave this ship alive.”



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"Shhh," I said. "It's a joke."

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I turned around to see Dr. Hatch standing behind me. I was paralyzed with fear. Suddenly everyone else vanished and it was just the two of us. Hatch leaned forward, close enough that I could feel his breath and see his eyes through the dark lenses of his sunglasses.

“I'm going to find you, Vey,” he whispered. “And when I do, I'm going to hurt you.”

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For Michael Vey trivia, sneak peeks, and events in your area, follow Michael and the rest of the Electroclan at:

WWW.MICHAELVEY.COM



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Join the official Michael Vey Facebook page!

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Join the ELECTROCLAN on Facebook!

For those 18 years and younger only, the Electroclan page has weekly contets, fan fiction, and fun interaction with all the Electroclan members! Don't miss out!

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is the #1 international bestselling author of *Michael Vey: The Prisoner of Cell 25*, *The Christmas Box*, and nineteen consecutive *New York Times* bestsellers. He is also the winner of the American Mothers Book Award and two first-place Storytelling World Awards.

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MICHAEL VEY
THE PRISONER OF CELL 25

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SIMON PULSE / MERCURY INK

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

www.SimonandSchuster.com

First Simon Pulse/Mercury Ink hardcover edition August 2012

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The text of this book was set in Berling LT Std.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Evans, Richard Paul.

Michael Vey : rise of the Elgen / by Richard Paul Evans. p. cm.

Sequel to: Michael Vey, the prisoner of cell 25

Summary: Fifteen-year-old Michael Vey, born with Tourette's syndrome and special electromagnetic powers, joins his techno-genius best friend and an alliance of other "electric" teenagers to battle powerful foes in the jungles of Peru, where Michael learns the Order of

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ISBN 978-1-4424-5414-9 (alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4424-5462-0 (eBook)

[1. Friendship—Fiction. 2. Electricity—Fiction. 3. Tourette syndrome—Fiction.

4. Peru—Fiction. 5. Science fiction.] I. Title. II. Title: Rise of the Elgen.

PZ7.E89227Mi 2012 [Fic]—dc23 2012022717

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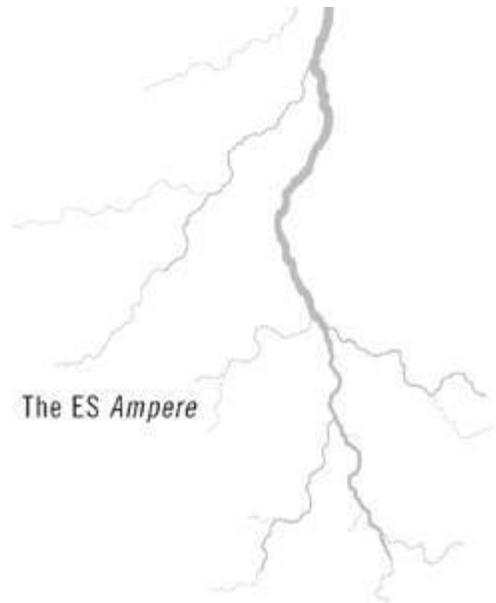
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To Abigail
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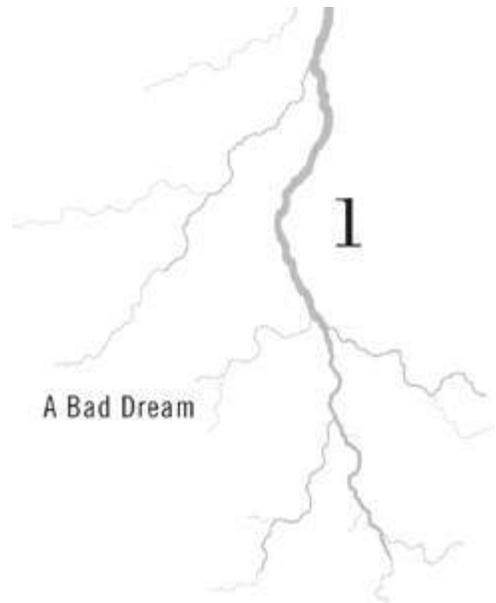
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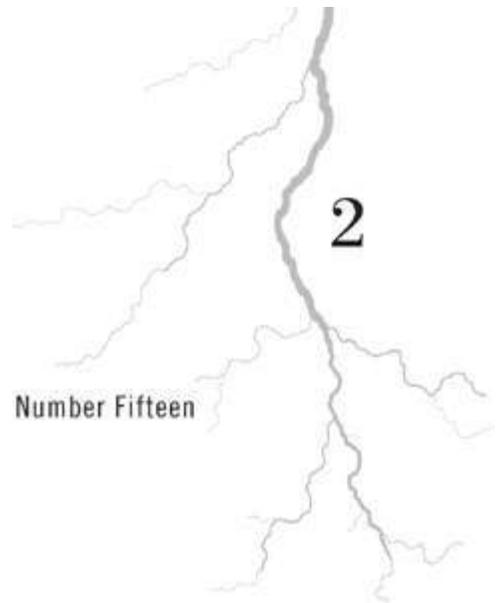
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“I'm going to find you, Vey,” he whispered. “And when I do, I'm going to hurt you.”

That's when I woke up in the jungle.



It took me a moment to remember where I was. Some kind of Amazonian jungle insect-beast was crawling on my face, and as soon as I realized it, I sat up, wildly brushing it off. Someone started laughing. A young native girl was on her knees on the ground next to me. She was wearing a dress made of tree bark and was holding something that looked like one of the dream catchers my mother used to hang on her wall. I also noticed that my foot had been packed in dark dried mud, wrapped in leaves, and tied up with jute twine. Surprisingly, my ankle wasn't aching anymore. "Hey," I said to the girl.

She gazed at me with dark, intense eyes. "*Dzao an, hen keai.*"

"I have no idea what you're saying," I said. "I have no idea what any of you have been saying."

She smiled, then set down the dream catcher and ran out of my hut.

Now what? I thought. I lay there for a while, wondering what I should do. I still didn't know what the tribe had planned for me. It crossed my mind that I should try to escape. But where would I go? The jungle had to be at least as dangerous as this place, and I'd only get more lost—if that were possible.

Out of nervousness, I sat up and started making lightning balls and throwing them against the wall, which wasn't exactly smart. You know how they say that people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones? They could also say, people in thatch huts shouldn't throw lightning balls, because the wall will catch on fire. It did. I had to use my shirt to beat the flames out. I had just extinguished them and was sitting back on my mat, pulling my shirt on, when the chief walked into my hut flanked by two warrior tribesmen. There was still a lot of smoke in the room, and the chief looked at the burned spots on the wall, then back at me. As usual, the warriors just stared at me with angry expressions, like they wanted to skewer me with their spears, then eat me.

"Good afternoon, Michael Vey," the chief said.

"Uh, hi," I replied, not sure how I was supposed to talk to a tribal chief. My eye started twitching. I still didn't know how the guy knew my name. Just the fact that he spoke English freaked me out a little.

"How is your ankle?" he asked.

"It's not hurting like it was."

"Stand," he said.

I slowly stood. My ankle was still a little sore, but it was not nearly as painful as it had been the day before.

"It feels better," I said.

He nodded. "The jungle medicine is strong. By tonight it will be healed."

I didn't know what medicine they had used, or even when they had wrapped my ankle—I had slept through it all—but whatever they'd done was nothing short of miraculous. "Thank you," I said.

He stepped closer to me. "How did you dream?"

"I had weird dreams."

He looked concerned. "What did you dream?"

"I dreamt about this guy called Dr. Hatch. He said he would find me."

The chief frowned. "Then he will find you."

His saying that chilled me. Hatch had found me twice before, and both times I had barely escaped with my life. I couldn't imagine being lucky three times. "It was just a nightmare," I said.

The chief just looked at me gravely. "*Wo syiwang jeiyang*," he said. Then he said in English, "We can hope."

"Do you know where my friends are?" I asked.

"The woman with the two boys is deep in the jungle. They are safe."

"What about the others? The ones like me."

"They are not safe. The Peruvian army is hunting them—as they are hunting you. You must leave the jungle soon."

"Why is the Peruvian army hunting us?"

"I do not know their ways." After a moment, he said, "Come. There is someone you must meet."

"Who?"

"You will see." The chief turned and walked out of my hut. The warriors stood next to me.

"*Janchi lai!*" one shouted.

I followed the guards outside. We walked maybe twenty yards to the edge of the clearing where there was a small hut set apart from the others. We stopped at its door.

The chief said to me, "When you go, there is someone you must take with you." He turned back toward the hut and raised his hands. "*Hung fa*," he shouted. "*Gwo lai!*"

A moment later a young woman came out of the hut. She looked like she was my age—pretty with dark red hair and freckles. She looked at me curiously, then at the chief, as if awaiting an explanation.

"She is one of you," the chief said.

"She's American?" I asked.

The girl stepped toward me. "He means I'm electric. Like you. You must be Michael."

I looked at her quizzically. "How did you know that?"

"Because I know all the electric kids except for the last two the Elgen hadn't found. You're not a girl, so you must be Michael Vey." She reached out her hand. "I'm Tesla."

As my hand neared her, electricity began to spark between my fingers. I pulled back, afraid to shock her. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not trying to do that."

She just gazed into my eyes. "It's all right. You can't hurt me."

I still kept my hand to myself. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” she said.

“What’s your power?”

“Have you met any of the others like us?”

“Yes.”

“Have you met Nichelle?”

I stepped back from her. “Yes.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not like her. Actually, I’m the opposite of Nichelle.”

“You mean you’re not a psycho Goth freak?”

She grinned. “I meant my powers. I don’t suck away electric powers. I enhance them. Here, shake my hand.” She stuck out her hand again. “Go on.”

I just looked at her.

“C’mon,” she said. “You won’t hurt me. Promise.”

I hesitantly reached my hand out. The closer I got to her, the more intensely my electricity sparked. When we touched, my hand was glowing pure blue-white, almost like it was in the rat bowl.

“You have a lot of electricity,” she said. “It . . . tickles.”

“Tickles?”

“Yeah. I usually don’t even feel it.” She stepped back from me and my electricity lessened. “You’re very electric. Far more than any of the other Glows.”

“You were amplifying my electricity?”

“Yes. But I wasn’t really trying. If I tried, I could make you produce ten times that. At least.”

“That could be useful,” I said.

“Dr. Hatch thought so.”

My heart froze at the mention of him. “You’re with Hatch?”

“Not anymore.”

“Why are you here—in the jungle?”

“The Amacarra rescued me. I escaped from the Starxource compound by crawling out through a pipe that runs underground. . . .”

“The Weekend Express,” I said.

She looked surprised. “You know about that?”

“It’s the same way I got out.”

“Then you know it just drops you out in the middle of the jungle with a lot of snakes and stuff. It was dangerous, being alone in the jungle. I’m not like you. I don’t have any powers of my own. I probably would have been eaten by something if it wasn’t for the Amacarra.”

“Why were you here in Peru in the first place?”

“Hatch was using me to amplify the electricity the plant was producing. Do you know how the plant works?”

“The electric rats . . .”

She nodded. “I was able to increase the amount of electricity they produced by more than three times.” She cocked her head. “So you also know about the rat bowl.”

“I broke it.”

“What?”

“Actually my friends broke it. I just helped.”

She looked at me in amazement.

“What kind of name is Tesla?”

“Actually, it used to be Tessa. A few months after I was captured by the Elgen, Hatch added the *l*, in honor of Nikola Tesla, the great inventor and pioneer of electricity. He’s the guy who invented the Tesla coil.”

“Like in science,” I said.

She nodded. “Hatch thought changing my name was pretty clever. Tesla is also the name of one of the Elgen boats.”

“They have boats?”

“Practically a whole navy.”

“Why?”

“It’s where they live. If they lived in any real country, they’d probably be arrested. So they made their own country.”

“You’ve seen their ships?”

“Only the *Ampere* and the *Volta*. The *Volta* is a science boat. It’s where they do their most secret experiments. It’s not as nice as the *Ampere*. The *Ampere* is where all the Elgen brass are.”

“Brass?”

“You know, the bosses. Hatch’s boss.”

“I didn’t know he had a boss.”

Tesla grinned. “I don’t think he does either. I’m pretty sure they don’t like each other. Hatch calls them the board of jesters.”

“You should change your name back. Tessa’s a pretty name.”

She thought about it for a moment. “I like that idea. It could be my declaration of independence.” She nodded. “Call me Tessa.”

“Tessa,” I said. “So how long have you been here?”

“I’ve been in Peru for more than two years. I came three weeks before they turned on the Starxource plant. But I’ve been in the jungle about six months. I think. It’s hard to keep track of time out here. It’s not like the Amacarra have calendars.”

“You’ve been here for six months and the Elgen still haven’t found you?”

“They sent guards out looking for me.” Tessa looked at the chief. “But the Amacarra know the jungle. They protect me.”

“I am sorry we cannot protect you now,” the chief interjected. I had forgotten that he was even standing there. “There are too many of them coming. The dark magic of the *Chullanchaqui* is too strong for us.”

Tessa turned to me. “Do you know what’s going on out there?”

“When we shut down their power plant, all the guards came after us. But now the Peruvian army is looking for us too. The chief said we’ll have to leave their village soon.”

Hearing this upset Tessa, and she began to tear up. “Then we’ll leave,” she said to the chief. “You’ve risked too much for me already.”

The chief frowned. “It is with great sadness that you leave,” he said. “You are Amacarra, Hung fa.” He turned and walked away.

I let Tessa compose herself before I asked, “What’s a *Chullanchaqui*?”

“The natives believe the *Chullanchaqui* is a demon who lives in the Amazon jungle. It appears as a friend and lures people off into the jungle where they are never heard from again. The chief thinks Hatch is the *Chullanchaqui*.”

“He’s right,” I said.

Tessa nodded, then said, “I have a lot of questions. Do you want to go into my hut and talk?”

“Sure,” I said. I followed her inside. Her hut was nicer than the one I’d stayed in. The walls were decorated with bright red and green parrot feathers, and the ground was completely covered with a thick mat woven from leaves. We sat cross-legged across from each other, my back toward the door.

“Nice place,” I said.

She grinned. “For a jungle hut.” She looked at my mud cast. “What happened to your foot?”

“I hurt it while I was escaping from the Starxource plant. I woke up this morning with this mudpack on.”

“Is it broken?”

“I don’t know. I’m hoping it’s just sprained.”

“The medicine they put on it will help,” she said. “Your face keeps twitching. Are you feeling okay?”

“I have Tourette’s syndrome,” I said. “It makes me blink and gulp—stuff like that. Especially when I’m under stress.”

“Tourette’s,” she said. “I’ve heard of that. Is it contagious?”

“No. It’s genetic,” I said. “You won’t catch it.”

She nodded. “Before I came to Peru, there were two of you that the Elgen couldn’t find—you and a girl. Did they ever find her?”

“Taylor,” I said.

“Then you know her?”

I nodded. “I know her.”

She looked at me for a moment, then said, “You like her.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I can tell by the way you said her name.”

I didn’t realize I was that obvious. “She’s my girlfriend.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s out in the jungle with the rest of the Electroclan.”

“What’s an Electroclan?”

“That’s what we call ourselves. They’re my friends. Some of them used to be with Hatch. You might know them. Ian, Abigail, and McKenna. Zeus.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Zeus? You’re with Zeus?”

“You know Zeus?”

“I know them all,” she said. “I knew Zeus the best, since Ian, Abigail, and McKenna were locked up for insubordination. I’m glad Dr. Hatch finally let them out.”

“He didn’t. We rescued them.”

“And Zeus?”

“He came with us.”

“That surprises me,” she said. “But he always was a wild card.”

“He still is.”

“So how did you meet up with them?” she asked.

“It started when Hatch kidnapped my mother and Taylor. I went after them.”

“Have you ever met Dr. Hatch? I mean, face-to-face?”

I nodded. “The last time I saw him he tried to feed me to his rats.”

She grimaced. “Hatch made me watch someone be fed to the rats. That’s what he does to the guards who disobey him. How did you escape?”

“I absorbed the rats’ electricity. It made me too electric for them to touch.”

“You can absorb electricity?”

“That’s how I stopped Nichelle.”

She looked surprised. “You stopped Nichelle?”

“Yes.”

“No one’s ever stopped Nichelle.” Suddenly, Tessa looked up. “*Ni yau shemma?*”

I turned. The young woman who’d been in my hut when I woke up was standing in the doorway looking at us.

“*Hung fa. Ta bi laile. Tade jyau hai hwaide. Wo syu bang ta.*”

“*Hau, hau,*” Tessa said. She looked at me. “I guess you have to go.”

“Where?”

“She said your foot is still hurt. She needs to work on it some more.”

I lifted myself up. “Yeah, it’s still a little sore. It was nice meeting you.”

“Same here,” she said. “Though kind of surreal.”

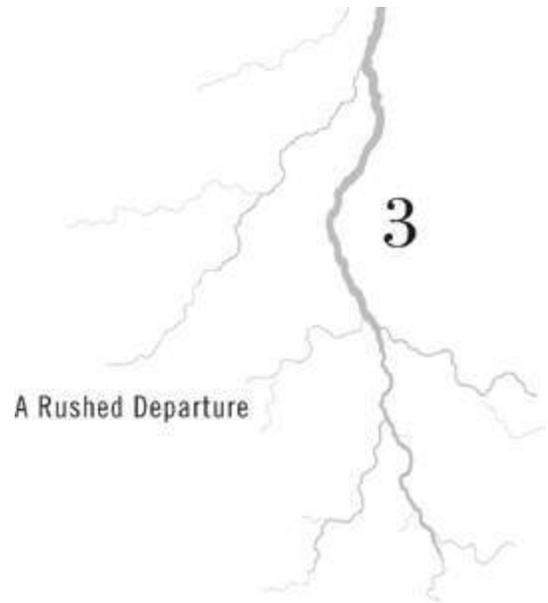
“What do you mean?”

“You’re kind of a legend. Like Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster.”

I looked at her quizzically.

“It’s just that everyone at the academy has talked about you for years. But I never thought I’d ever really meet you. Especially not in the middle of the Amazon jungle.”

“I never thought I’d be in the Amazon jungle,” I replied.



I followed the young woman back to my hut. When I got there, there were two stone bowls on the ground next to my bed. One had a thick, green substance in it. The other one also held liquid, but it was dark and watery with purple flowers floating in it. There was also a pile of fresh leaves next to the bowls.

"Dzwo," she said, pointing to the mat.

I guessed she was telling me to sit, so I sat down. She knelt down, untied the jute twine, and peeled back the leaves around my ankle.

"Fang sya," she said.

"What?"

She pushed back on my chest.

"You want me to lie down?" I asked. I partially lay back. "Like this?"

She laughed and pushed me again. *"Fang sya."*

I lay back. She set the leaves aside, then began peeling the hard clay from my foot. When it was all off, she washed my foot with warm, sweet-smelling liquid, then began rubbing some kind of salve on it. She kneaded my foot for nearly an hour. The massage felt really good, and the concoction she was rubbing into my ankle made my skin

tingle. I started to sit up to look, but she gently put her hand on my chest to stop me. "*Ching bu.*"

"Sorry," I said. "Just looking." I lay back and closed my eyes. After my ankle was fully coated she wrapped it in fragrant leaves, then gently tied it with the same cord as before. Then she came around and began running her fingers through my hair. "This is, like, better than a day spa," I said, even though I'd never actually been to one and she couldn't understand me anyway.

She didn't speak any more but continued to massage my scalp and gently tug on my hair. I had no idea what this had to do with healing my foot, but it felt really good.

After a few minutes she began to sing.

*Hen ke aide,
bu syi huan wo,
tai ke shi,
yin wo ai ni.*

*Hen ke aide,
Wai gwo haidz
Ho ni li wo,
hwei ni syang wo,*

*Wo syi wang, hwei
yin, wo ain ni,
jye nyu haidz
hwei syang ni.*

She sang the words over and over. I had no idea what she was singing, but it was pretty and soothing, and she seemed sad singing it. At one point she got particularly emotional. I partially opened one eye and saw that she was crying. She was still singing when I fell asleep.

* * *

I had another dream. I was alone in the jungle when a tiny Peruvian man with a wooden leg came to me. "We must hurry to someplace safe," he said. "*He is coming.*"

"Who's coming?" I asked.

"*El Chullanchaqui.*"

"Who is that?"

"No time to explain," he said, running off into the jungle. In spite of his size and wooden leg, he moved quickly as I ran after him, deeper and deeper into the trees. The farther into the jungle we went, the darker it got, until it was nearly dark as night. Finally we stopped in a place that was too thick to hike through. The branches of the trees around me were snakes, snapping at me.

I looked at the man fearfully. "I thought you said you were taking me someplace safe."

"There is no safe place anymore."

"Who is *El Chullanchaqui*?"

He looked at me and smiled. "Me." Then he disappeared.

I woke, gasping. It was dark around me, and the hut was slightly illuminated by the glow of my skin. The girl was gone. I took a deep breath and rubbed my forehead. *I've got to stop dreaming*, I thought.

* * *

It was about a half hour later that the young woman returned. I could see her silhouette in the entranceway. She wore flowers in her black hair and dozens of red and purple beads, which shone against her bare shoulders and neck. She looked pretty.

"*Hen keaidi, ni laile.*" She reached her hand out to me.

I took a step toward her and realized that my foot felt completely better. I touched it, then looked at her and smiled. "Thank you."

"*Bu yung, sye.*" She took my hand and led me out to the center of the village, where there was a large fire blazing. The natives looked at us as we arrived, their faces lit by the flickering flames. They were sitting around the fire on mats woven from palm leaves. There were many more women than men, and I guessed that the warriors were out patrolling the jungle.

I sat down on a mat next to the young woman, who looked very happy, her face blanketed with a contented smile.

“It’s a pretty night,” I said.

She didn’t speak.

“I can’t believe that you fixed my foot. Doctors in America can’t fix a foot that fast.”

She looked over at me, her eyes gazing deeply into mine.

“Hey, glow boy. She doesn’t speak English.”

I turned around to see Tessa walking up to us. At her approach the young woman frowned, then quietly stood and walked away. In the shadow outside of the fire, I could see Tessa’s faint glow, which was comforting to me. My own glow increased as she got nearer. She sat down next to me.

“What’s going on here?” I asked.

“It’s a funeral dinner. That’s why the women are wearing those red and purple beads.”

“A funeral dinner? Who died?”

Tessa gave me a funny smile. “We did.”

I stared at her. “They’re going to kill us?”

She laughed. “No, glowworm. When someone leaves that they won’t see again, they consider them dead.”

“That’s . . . creepy.”

“It’s their custom. I mean, it’s not like Americans don’t have weird customs—like, carving faces into pumpkins and putting candles in them. Or hanging lights on Christmas trees. How weird is that?”

“I never thought about it that way.”

“That’s because it’s what you’re raised with. Same with them. Unfortunately, their customs won’t be around much longer.”

“Why is that?”

“The Amacarra are going extinct,” she said. “There used to be thousands of them. Now this is all that’s left. There are more old people than young. Soon they will be down to less than a dozen people.”

“Why are they going extinct?”

“Same reason the American Indians did,” she said. “Disease. The shrinking forest. The modern world.”

The young woman returned and handed me a stone bowl filled with a yellow substance, mashed like potatoes.

“Wo gei ni chr, ke aide.”

I didn't know what she said but thanked her. She left us again.

Tessa asked, “Do you like Meihwa?”

I looked down at my bowl. “I don't know. I've never tried it.”

Tessa burst out laughing. “No, Meihwa is the girl who's been taking care of you.”

I looked up at her. “Oh, sorry. She seems nice. She mostly just looks at me and laughs.”

Tessa grinned. “Of course. She's only twelve. And she thinks you're cute.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because she calls you *henkeai*.”

I looked at her blankly. “Yeah, I've heard that. What does it mean?”

“It means she thinks you're cute.”

I wasn't sure what to say to that. “She's cute too.”

Tessa smiled. “If we were sticking around, the chief would probably marry her to you.”

“She's only twelve.”

“The Amacarra marry young.”

“Then it's a good thing I'm not sticking around,” I said.

“Good thing,” Tessa repeated.

I changed the subject. “So what's in the bowl?”

“Mashed bananas,” she said.

“Bananas,” I said. “Then it's good for our electricity.”

“Yes. But I don't think the Amacarra know that. It's just what they eat.”

I picked out a piece of something white and fibrous from the fruit. “This isn't banana.”

She took the piece from me and put it in her mouth. “It's piranha.”

“Piranha?”

“Yeah.”

“What does it taste like?”

She looked at me with a wry smile. “Chicken, of course. Just be glad it's not the *yasyegump*.”

“What’s that?”

“Squashed termite larvae.”

“They eat that?”

“Sometimes,” Tessa said. “It takes some getting used to.”

“I don’t think I’d ever get used to it.”

“You’d be surprised at what you can get used to,” Tessa said.

“Do they eat much piranha?”

“Yes. Maybe because it’s so easy to catch. The river is full of them.”

“What do they use for bait?”

“The Amacarra use spears to fish, so there’s no bait. But I’ve seen the Peruvian jungle men fish, and they use just about anything. I once saw a man cut a callous from his foot, put it on a hook, and fish with it.”

My dinner was looking less appetizing by the second. “We’re eating foot-fungus-fed piranha.”

“I told you, the Amacarra use spears. Go on, don’t be a chicken. It’s good. Besides, *eating* piranha is a lot better than the other way around.”

Just then an older woman with gray hair walked up to us. I could tell that Tessa liked her by the way her face lit up when she saw her. The woman held out a bowl of food to Tessa. Tessa took the bowl then said, “*Sye sye, muchin.*”

The woman smiled. “*Buyung kechi,*” she said. She touched Tessa on the cheek, then walked away.

“How did you learn the language?”

“I only know a little. If you hang out long enough, you start picking up things. Like this is how they eat.” She held up her hand with three fingers together. “You hold your fingers like this and scoop it up.” She lifted a lump of the stuff to her mouth and ate it.

I imitated her, dipping my fingers into the pasty goo, then put it into my mouth. Honestly, it wasn’t that bad. I would never think of eating fruit and fish together, but, in a jungle sort of way, it worked.

We ate a moment in silence, then I asked Tessa, “So what are you going to do after we get back to America?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll just try to live a normal life. Whatever that is.”

“You could, like, work for an electric company. Or with scientists.”
She raised an eyebrow. “I could if I wanted the Elgen to find me.”

“Sorry, bad idea,” I said. “Do you think Hatch will ever stop looking for you?”

She frowned. “No. Hatch never gives up. And he never forgets. It’s something he’s proud of.” She slowly exhaled. “What about you? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll go home with my mom. Finish high school.”

“That sounds nice,” she said. “Home.” She looked at me then asked, “Do you think Hatch will leave you alone?”

“No.” After a moment I asked, “How did Hatch get you?”

“I was nine. They kidnapped me from my room.”

“That’s horrible.”

She looked down. “It was pretty traumatic. But the Elgen psychologists, they”—she paused—“help you forget.”

“So you don’t remember your family?”

Her expression fell. “I remember some. I had a little brother. And my mother was just about to have another baby. He’d almost be six by now.”

“You could find them.”

“No. I can’t go back,” she said.

“Why not?”

“It’s not my world anymore.”

“It could be.”

Her expression grew more sorrowful. “No. I’ve seen too much.” She slowly shook her head. “I’ve done too much. I don’t belong anymore. They wouldn’t want me.”

“Of course they would. I bet they think about you all the time.”

Her eyes looked pained. “No, it just wouldn’t work anymore.”

“Why are you saying that?”

Her eyes flashed. “Because it’s true. When the Elgen take you, they do things to you. They change you. You’re not the same person you were. They convince you that your family doesn’t really want you anymore. They make you angry at them. They get you to denounce them.”

Hearing this made me heartsick. “Did you denounce your family?”

She didn't answer, but I could guess the answer from the pain in her eyes.

"You know that Hatch and the Elgen are liars, right?"

"Logically, I do. But this stuff is programmed into you as a kid. It takes root and grows into who you are. Pretty soon, you can't pull it out anymore because it's all that's left of you. Even if you know it's not true, it's all you know." Her voice fell. "It still feels true. And deep down inside, you're afraid that they're right. . . ."

"They're not right," I said. "The Elgen can twist the truth all they want, but they can't change it. A million lies can't make a single truth."

"But they can bury it so deep you'll never find it," she said. She took a deep breath. "Can we talk about something else?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

Just then an Amacarra tribesman ran into camp. He was speaking excitedly and his hands flew wildly around him, as if he were swatting at a swarm of bees. Everyone around us stilled and the chief's expression grew solemn. Then he stood and walked over to us. "The army is near. It is time for you to go to the river. *Ma shang*."

"Now?" I asked Tessa.

"*Ma shang* means 'immediately,'" Tessa said, setting her bowl down on the ground.

The chief shouted something and a woman ran away from the fire, then returned carrying two woven blankets. "You must wear these," he said. "To hide your glow."

We put them around us, like cloaks, so that only our faces showed. A half dozen warriors surrounded us.

"Come," the chief said. "We must hurry."

I looked across the fire. Meihwa was looking at me. A tear, glistening from the light of the fire, ran down her cheek. I waved at her, but she just turned away.

* * *

The expedition was composed of Tessa and me, the chief, six warriors, and the old woman who had served Tessa food.

The Amacarra village wasn't far from the river, less than a half hour by foot, and we hurried through the jungle as fast as we could run, over fallen trees and around quicksand, with hardly a wasted step. Everyone moved quickly, even the elderly woman, who I had trouble keeping up with. Every now and then the chief would turn back and say to me, "*Kwai, kwai ba!*" Which I took to mean, "Run faster!"

We moved without speaking, and a few times we heard the echo of gunfire in the distance, which only increased our pace. I wondered if the army had reached the Amacarra village and if they would harm the villagers.

At the river we walked down a small incline to a dugout canoe. Two caimans were on the shore next to the canoe but turned and splashed into the water at our approach, their thick tails making final flicks at us before disappearing in the dark brown water. Two of the warriors got into the canoe, while the others began cutting large fronds from the trees that overhung the bank, piling them next to the canoe.

"Get in," the chief said to us.

Tessa turned to the old woman. There were tears in both their eyes. "*Muchin,*" Tessa said and they embraced. The tension around us was thick and in spite of their emotion, they held each other for only a moment before they separated. The woman took off one of her necklaces, a long string of bright red seeds, and put it over Tessa's neck. I now understood that the old woman had come with us only to say good-bye.

"*Kwai ba!*" the chief shouted. "*Mei o shr jyan!*"

The pair embraced once more, then Tessa turned and climbed into the boat. She turned back one more time to look at the woman. "I will never forget you, Mama," she said.

The old woman touched her hand to her heart.

I climbed into the boat after Tessa.

"Michael Vey," the chief said. "Look at me."

"Yes, sir."

"I have dreamed a dream. Over the water, a choice will come to you. You must choose between the lives of a few you love or the lives of many you do not know."

"I don't want that choice," I said.

"No one would wish that choice. But fate does not bend for us—we must bend to it. Now go! *Chyu ba!*"

The tribesmen motioned for Tessa and me to lie down next to each other, then they pulled our blankets up over us and covered us with the broad green leaves they had collected.

The floor of the canoe was rough and pungent and looked as if it had been pounded out with rocks. Beneath the blankets our glows were bright enough to easily see each other. The boat was narrow, so our bodies were pressed tightly together. My glow was brighter wherever her body touched mine. I was anxious, and my electricity arced loudly between us.

"Can you stop doing that?" Tessa whispered.

"I'll try."

With some effort, I made the arcing stop, though an occasional buildup would jump between us, especially from our heads, which were touching.

"It's so cramped," she said. She pulled the necklace she'd just received up around her throat, then slid forward until my head was against her chest. "Is this better?"

"That's better," I said. I could hear her heart pounding rapidly. Lying against her like this made me think of Taylor. I remembered how she'd held me that night by the pool outside of Mitchell's house. I wished she were with me now. Actually, I wished we were back at Mitchell's house.

The tribesmen pushed the boat away from the shore, and I could hear the rhythmic slap of their paddles against the water as we slipped out over the cold, dark river.

"Who was that woman?" I asked Tessa.

"That's Aigei," she said. "But I call her *muchin*, for mother. She's been like a mother to me since I was found."

Considering that she had been separated from her real mother at such a young age, I wondered what that meant to her.

"That's a pretty necklace she gave you," I said.

"It's made from *huayruro* seeds. It's supposed to bring good luck."

“We could use it,” I said. I had no idea where we were going or how long we would be in the boat, but I gathered it might be a while. After a little while Tessa fell asleep, but I couldn’t sleep. At least not at first. I was too worried—not just about us, but about my mother and my friends. I lay awake for what seemed like a long time before sleep overtook me.



I awoke to one of the tribesmen shaking me. I rubbed my eyes and looked up. It was dawn, and Tessa was already sitting up, her hair matted to the side of her head. She pulled her hair back from her face. "I think we're here."

I lifted myself up and peered over the side of the boat. We were docked, but all I could see was more jungle. "Where's here?"

"I don't know," Tessa said. "Somewhere downriver."

"With your old friend Jaime," a voice said.

I spun around. Standing behind us on the shore was Jaime, the Peruvian man who had brought us into the jungle.

"Jaime!"

"Mr. Michael," he said, stepping forward. "Let me help you out."

"Help her first," I said, looking at Tessa.

Jaime offered her his hand, but she grabbed the side of the canoe and climbed out by herself. I got out too.

When I was on the bank he said, "Congratulations, amigo."

I looked at him quizzically. "What for?"

"For still being alive," he said. "And for making some serious trouble. *Mucho caos.*"

I'm pretty sure that that was the first time in my life that someone had congratulated me for causing trouble. "More than we planned on," I said.

Tessa looked at Jaime suspiciously. "How do you know this guy?"

"He's the one who brought us into the jungle."

"How did you meet him?"

"I'll tell you later," I said. "But we can trust him. He's a friend."

She still looked unsure. "You're from Idaho. How do you have a Peruvian friend?" She looked directly at Jaime. "Are you an Elgen?"

"Ufff! *Que locura!*" Jaime said. He looked her directly in the eyes. "Do not insult me. I would rather cut out my own heart and feed it to the piranhas than to be called one of those demons."

"That's pretty graphic," she said.

"We have not the time to chitchat," Jaime said. "We must hurry. You have angered the Elgen wasps, and they are looking for someone to sting."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Into the jungle," he said. He turned to the tribesmen. "*Feichang, sye sye.*"

They slightly bowed. "*Bukechi,*" they replied. They immediately paddled away from the shore until they were in the middle of the river and headed upstream.

"Those guys are strong," I said. "They didn't even rest."

Jaime turned back to me. "They have not time to rest," Jaime said. "Neither do we. Come. *Vámonos!*"

We followed him through a path in the trees that quickly disappeared, overgrown with foliage and snarled tree roots that rose like snakes through the jungle's dark soil. Even though it was morning, beneath the canopy it was dark enough that Tessa and I could see our glows.

We had hiked more than an hour into the jungle when the foliage in front of us suddenly lightened into a small clearing, exposing an elaborate campsite built next to a stream.

"We are home," Jaime said.

"It's not my home," Tessa said, looking around.

I surveyed the camp with wonder. “How did you get all this stuff back here?”

“With much work,” Jaime said. “This is our base to monitor the Elgen.”

The camp consisted of two large nylon tents, a cooking spit, a generator next to at least a dozen plastic gas cans, and a metal communications tower that rose as high as the trees but no higher. About fifteen yards from the camp Jaime suddenly stopped, holding his hands out. “*Alto.*”

In spite of my B+ in Mrs. Waller’s eighth-grade Spanish, I didn’t recognize Jaime’s command to stop, and Tessa and I just kept walking.

“I’m starving,” Tessa said. “I hope he’s got something to eat.”

Jaime lunged at me, grabbing me by the arm. “*Párate!* Stop! Do not walk any farther.”

I hadn’t seen him coming for me and instinctively pulsed. Jaime screamed as he fell to the ground. I looked down at him. He was holding his arm and moaning. “*Ay caramba, caramba, caramba!*”

“I didn’t mean to do that,” I said. “It’s just habit.”

“You are worse than the *anguila*,” Jaime said, still grimacing with pain. “You must not walk any farther.” From the ground Jaime pointed toward a twitching pile of fur lying near the second tent. “See? It is a trap.”

“Who would set a trap out here?” I asked.

“I did. It is a safety.”

“A safety?” Tessa replied. “I think you’re using that word wrong.”

Jaime rose to his knees. He picked up a fallen branch on the ground and threw it into the clearing ten feet in front of us. There was an immediate eruption of gunfire and bullets that tore through the wood, shredding it into slivers.

“Whoa,” I said.

“That totally could have been us,” Tessa said. “Swiss cheese.”

“That is my safety to make sure no one enters my camp when I am gone. Before we go in I must deactivate the sensor.”

“I’m for that,” Tessa said.

Jaime took a small, black cylindrical object out of his pocket. It was about the shape and size of a lipstick tube, with a single red button on

top. He pushed it. "It is safe now."

Looking at the quivering animal near the edge of the clearing, I wasn't about to step into the firing zone. "Are you sure it's off?"

"Yes. Look." He lifted another piece of wood and threw it into the clearing. This time nothing happened. "It is turned off." He pointed toward the gun. "There is no light on the turret." He climbed back to his feet and stepped forward, still rubbing his shocked arm. "We are safe. I will go first."

He walked into the clearing, with Tessa and me close behind.

"That was pretty cool," I said. "How does it work?"

"It is simple, amigo. There are two guns." He led me to one of the machines. The turret was run by electric motors mounted onto steel pipes that Jaime had wrapped up in leaves. The contraption looked simple enough, and my first thought was that Ostin could probably build one of these from spare parts he had in his bedroom. The thought of that made me miss him.

"It is a robotic sentry that runs off a program from my laptop. I bought it from an American company that makes them for paintball guns."

I touched the gun's barrel. It was still warm. "They make these for paintball guns?"

"Yes. I just made some adjustments." He pointed to the other side of the clearing. "The other one is over there behind that tree. They are very fast. Each one can move so quickly it can follow up to four targets at the same time."

"How does it know when to shoot?" Tessa asked.

"The guns are activated by movement. They shoot anything that moves past its camera." He turned back to me. "I put these here to keep my equipment safe from Elgen when I am not here. If they were to get our communication codes, it would endanger everything."

"It seems . . . extreme," Tessa said.

"Our cause is extreme," Jaime said seriously. "The sentry is very effective, but so far all it has shot are monkeys. That is good."

"Not for the monkeys," Tessa said.

"Monkeys and whatever that thing is," I said, looking at the animal, which had finally stopped twitching.

“What is that thing?” Tessa asked.

Jaime pointed to the pile of fur. “That, *senorita*, is dinner—the *osohormiguero*.”

“Lovely,” she replied.

I walked up to examine the beast. It had thick, spiky fur and a long body about four feet in length, not including its tail, which was curled up around its belly. I still couldn’t tell what it was, and I had to push it over with my foot to see its head. It had small dark eyes and an elongated snout. “It’s an anteater,” I said.

“*Was*,” Tessa said. “I think its ant-eating days are over.”

“Yes, you call it an anteater,” Jaime said. “It is most tasty.”

“I’ve had it before,” Tessa said. “It was okay.” She looked at Jaime. “Do you have anything to drink?”

“The water barrel is there,” Jaime said, pointing to a five-gallon white plastic bucket. “You must lift the lid. The cup is hanging next to it. Be sure to look for spiders. They like the water.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said. She unhooked the tin-handled cup hanging next to the bucket, then lifted the bucket’s lid. For a moment she just stared. “There’s something dead in here,” she said dryly. “Actually, there’s like a million dead things in here, but there’s one really big dead thing.”

Jaime walked over and looked in. He took another cup and lifted out an eight-inch insect. “It is only a walking stick. Not poisonous.”

“I feel so much better now,” Tessa said. She skimmed the top of the bucket, dumping the contents of her cup on the ground three times before scooping up a cup of water clear enough to drink. She drank down two cups, then filled it up again and brought it over to me. There were small things floating around in it, mostly mosquitoes and fleas, but I drank it anyway.

“Thanks,” I said.

“It’s funny how we adapt, isn’t it? In the academy days I would complain if my water didn’t have a slice of lime in it. But after being in the jungle this long, hardly anything bothers me anymore. I once ate a roasted armadillo. The Amacarra roll them up and cook them in their own shells.”

“What I wouldn’t give for a cheeseburger about now,” I said.

“Sorry,” Jaime said. “No cheeseburgers. But I do have food.” He disappeared into the first tent and returned carrying two boxes, which he handed to us. “I was only making a joke about the anteater,” he said. “We cannot make a fire to roast it. The Elgen soldiers could follow the smoke. But trust me, it is very delicious.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said.

We opened the boxes. Inside was a ham sandwich sealed in cellophane, a package of crackers with soft cheese, quinoa cake, a Sublime chocolate bar, a piece of fruit I’d never seen before, a bottle of Inca Kola, and a yogurt drink.

“Real food,” Tessa said. “*Muchas, muchas gracias*. It’s been so long.”

“Yes, thanks,” I said. “I’m starving.”

“Come inside the tent to eat,” he said. “We will talk.” Jaime lifted the mosquito netting around the second tent. We ducked under the netting and went inside. The interior was a square, about twelve feet by twelve feet, cluttered with crates and barrels. There was a small collapsible plastic table against one side of the tent with a ham radio and a digital clock. Stacked up next to the table were long crates with the word PELIGRO stenciled on them.

Jaime grabbed himself a box of food, and all three of us sat down on the tent’s vinyl tarp floor.

“I like this Inca Kola,” I said. “It tastes like bubble gum.”

“You have this in America?” Jaime asked.

“No,” I said. “At least not in Idaho.”

“Shame,” he said.

I lifted the fruit.

“What is this?”

“Granadilla,” Jaime said. “Try it.”

I peeled it open. Inside, the fruit was gray and looked like mucus.

“It looks like snot,” Tessa said.

Jaime laughed. “Yes, Americans call it ‘snot fruit!’ Try it!”

I looked at it for a moment, then took a bite. It actually was quite good. Tessa just looked disgusted.

“I just threw up in my mouth,” she said.

I ate the rest of the fruit, then took hers as well.

“There’s something I’m wondering,” Tessa said. “How did the Amacarra know to find you here?”

“A few days ago, when I saw smoke coming from the compound, I asked the chief to keep an eye out for Michael and the others.”

“So that’s how he knew my name,” I said.

“Yes. I told him about you.” Jaime looked at Tessa. “But I am surprised that he did not tell me about you.”

“They were looking out for me,” Tessa said.

Jaime shook his head. “Our affairs are not the Amacarra’s affairs. But the Elgen have been bad to them.”

“Do you know where my mother and friends are?” I asked.

“Your mother and Tanner made it to the rendezvous site. They are now safe with our people.”

Hearing this filled me with a powerful sense of relief. “And what about the rest of the Electroclan?”

Jaime’s expression turned. “They have been captured.”

My relief vanished. “The Elgen got them?”

“No. The Peruvian army.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand why they’re hunting us.”

“It was my country’s electricity you stopped.”

“Do you know where they’re being held?”

“They are at a jail in Puerto Maldonado. But we are sure they will take them back to Lima to be tried.”

“Tried? For what?”

“For terrorism.”

“Terrorism! We’re not terrorists! The Elgen are the terrorists. We were helping your country!”

“They did not ask for your help. The way they see it, you put my country out of power. Shops and businesses shut down. Hospitals are on backup generators. People will go hungry. The power outage cost my country millions and millions of dollars. Only *we* know that what you did was good.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No. But that is how it is in the world—the wise are hung and the fools are glorified, at least while they are living.”

I raked my fingers back through my hair. "What will happen if they try them in your courts?"

"They will probably find them guilty of terrorism."

"What will they do to them? They're just teenagers."

Jaime's voice came slowly. "If they are found guilty, their age will not matter."

"What will they do to them?" I asked again.

Jaime hesitated. "They will probably be executed."

My blood ran cold. "They can't do that."

"My country abolished the death penalty in 1979, but not for treason and terrorism."

"We can't let that happen. *I'm* not going to let that happen. How many soldiers are there?"

"More than you can fight," Jaime said. "Maybe as many as four thousand soldiers. Even if our organization risked everything and came out in the open to help you, we could not rescue your friends."

"An army couldn't," I said. "But a mouse can get in where a lion can't."

He looked at me. "That is true."

"I could sneak in and rescue them like we did in Pasadena. Are they still in Puerto Maldonado?"

"You will never get close. There are many patrols, and they have built fences. I am certain that they will be moving your friends soon."

"They'll fly them to Lima?"

"No, they will not fly," Jaime said. "They must have been warned about Tanner, because they did not bring any aircraft into the area. And Tanner destroyed all the Elgen helicopters."

"But you said that Tanner's gone."

"The Elgen and the army do not know that."

"Then they'll have to drive them to Lima," Tessa said.

"There is only one road to Lima," Jaime said. "It is a mountain road and very narrow at spots. That is your best chance of stopping them. It could be like Thermopylae."

"The what?" Tessa asked.

"Thermopylae is an ancient place in Greece where three hundred Spartans held off tens of thousands of Persians. It is a narrow place

that a large army can't march through. If only a few people can get through the door at a time, it doesn't matter how many people there are."

"If we stop the trucks in front, the rest will be trapped behind them," I said.

"Then what?" Tessa asked.

"In the confusion, I'll sneak in and free my friends."

"They will be guarded," Jaime said.

"I can take care of that," I said.

"But you will still be surrounded by the entire army," Jaime said.

"If we had everyone's powers . . .," I said.

Jaime looked skeptical. "Those powers did not stop them from being captured."

"But if they were enhanced." I turned to Tessa. "Could you enhance everyone's power at the same time?"

"I enhanced a half million rats' power at the same time," she said.

"If we had even ten times the power, Taylor could reboot all the soldiers at the same time, and we could just walk out of there. Zeus could fire real lightning and destroy any weapon. McKenna could go supernova and melt everything in sight."

Jaime looked at me. "It is still a big risk. We need to talk to the voice and see what he says."

"You can contact the voice?" I asked.

He looked around cautiously, then nodded. "Yes."

"What's 'the voice'?" Tessa asked.

Jaime looked at me, then Tessa. "We cannot speak of the voice around her."

Tessa turned red. "You don't trust me? I followed you into the middle of the jungle, and you don't trust *me*?"

"Tessa, it's okay," I said. "He's not trying to insult you. He's just got to be sure."

"Then *get* sure," she said to Jaime.

Suddenly, Jaime froze. "Do you hear that?"

We stopped talking to listen. "No," I said. I looked at Tessa.

"I don't hear anything," Tessa said, still sounding annoyed. "In fact, it's kind of quiet."

“Yes,” Jaime said. “Exactly.” He stood. “Just a minute.” He parted the door and walked out of the tent.

As soon as the tent’s flap shut, Tessa asked, “What’s this voice?”

I looked at the door to make sure Jaime was really gone, then back at her. I lowered my voice. “After we escaped from Pasadena we went back to Idaho. The Elgen followed us. We were hiding from them at a tanning salon when a woman came in and handed me a cell phone. There was a man on the other end. He knew who we were and where we’d been. He knew all about the Elgen. That’s how we got down here. He flew us down.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that he hates Hatch as much as I do.”

“Why is he so secret?”

“Because secrecy is his most important weapon. You can’t fight an enemy you don’t know exists.”

She nodded. “That makes sense.” She looked around the place. “What if this voice tells you not to go after your friends?”

“I’ll go anyway.”

“They mean that much to you?”

“They’re my friends,” I said. “You don’t abandon your friends.”

For a moment she was quiet. Then she said, “It wasn’t like that at the academy. We got along because it was a rule. But everyone was in competition with one another.” She looked at me seriously. “Friends or not, I don’t think it’s a good idea going up against the army. You’ll only get caught.”

“I have to,” I said. “And I really need your help.”

She looked down. “I don’t know,” she said. “I have to think about it. If Hatch captures me, he’ll punish me for running away.”

I looked into her eyes. “Tessa, I can’t do it without you.”

She took a deep breath. “I just don’t know. I have to think about it.”

I sighed. “Think about it. Because either way, I’m going.”

The silence between us grew uncomfortable and I began gulping. After another minute I said, “Jaime’s been gone a long time for just checking around.”

“Maybe he had to use the bathroom,” Tessa said.

I stood. "I'm going to go see what he's doing."

I walked out of the tent. At first I didn't see anything. I took a few steps before I saw Jaime lying motionless on the ground.

"Jaime?" I started walking toward him. "Tessa!" I shouted.

Tessa came to the flap of the tent and looked out. "What is it?"

"Jaime's on the ground."

"Did he have a heart attack?"

Someone shouted, "Put your hands on your head and walk out of the tent! Now!"

I looked up as a squad of uniformed Elgen guards emerged from the jungle. Their guns were pointed at us.

"Now!" the guard shouted again. "Both of you. Or we'll open fire."

"I'm not going back," Tessa said, her voice pitched with terror. She ducked into the tent.

I put my hands on my head. "Don't shoot."

"Don't try anything, Vey," one of the guards said. "Or we will. And tell the girl to get back out here before we shoot up the tent."

I turned back. "Tessa, come out!" I shouted. "They'll shoot."

"Tessa?" the short guard to my left repeated. "Was that really Tessa, aka Tesla?"

I didn't answer.

"Jackpot, boys," the guard said. "It's two-for-one day at the Happy Mart. Vey *and* Tessa. Hatch is going to be happier than a monkey on a banana boat."

Tessa slowly walked back out. She was shaking.

"Beautiful little Tessa," the guard said, grinding his teeth. "Remember me? Carvelle?" He walked up to her. "I always had a thing for redheads. And then you had to go and run off." His expression turned dark. "Hatch was so upset when you went missing that he fed your bodyguard to the rats." His eyes narrowed. "He was my cousin."

Tessa swallowed. She looked pale, like she might faint.

"Did someone radio base?" a guard asked.

"There's no coverage," the captain replied. "We'll radio it in back at the river."

"Look at that tower," another guard said. "They've been communicating with someone."

“Let’s find out who,” the captain said. “Search the tents.”

Four of the guards disappeared into the tents.

I was twitching a lot and electricity was sparking around me wildly. Under duress it always did, but with Tessa standing next to me it was crazy. It was even sparking between my legs, climbing from my ankles to thighs like a Jacob’s ladder.

“Stop sparking!” the main guard shouted.

“I can’t help it,” I said.

“Then I’ll help you,” another voice said. Two of those yellow-and-red-striped darts struck me in the side.

I collapsed to the ground, groaning as I fell. But I was still sparking. The darts started smoking, then blew. My energy immediately returned.

“It’s Tessa,” Carvelle said. “She’s making him more electric. She’s got that way with men.”

Three darts hit Tessa. Then another three darts hit me. Tessa fell to the ground about two yards from me. My electricity stopped.

Tessa was almost breathless with pain. My own pain was agonizing, but she seemed less able to handle it.

“Let’s move it,” the captain shouted. “Pedro, Pair, and Sanchez, secure the radio. Find out who they’ve been broadcasting to. I want all codes, logs, and frequencies. Then we’re going to pack that thing out of here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Johnny and Ryan, you have Vey. Cuff and RESAT him. And be careful, he’s slippery. Carvelle, since you and Tessa are such good friends, she’s all yours. RESAT her, too.”

“My pleasure,” Carvelle said, pulling the white RESAT box out of his pack. “I’m going to keep it turned up a bit high just to be sure you’re not enjoying this, sweetheart. Every time you scream out with pain I want you to think about my cousin in the bowl.”

Tessa began to cry.

The men connected the RESAT to my leg, then they rolled me onto my stomach and pinned my arms behind my back and banded them together.

“Should we band his legs?” one of the guards asked.

“Only if you want to carry him out of here,” another replied.

“That would be negatory.” He laughed. He smacked me in the head. “Sorry, boy. No free rides on this train.”

Out of my peripheral vision I could see them cuffing Tessa’s hands as well. She was still crying but not struggling. She looked as if she was having difficulty breathing. The RESAT was set way too high for her.

When we were both secure they dragged Tessa, on her back, to the center of the camp and lay her next to me; then the men left us to join the others searching the tents, leaving just two guards to watch over us. That’s all they needed. With the RESATs we could barely even breathe, let alone escape.

With some effort I looked over at Jaime. He was so still I wondered if he was dead. But I hadn’t heard any gunshots and he’d been cuffed, which wouldn’t make sense if he were dead. Then I saw the dart sticking out of his hip. It was not like one of the RESAT darts—it was more like a needle. They had tranquilized him. Of course they had. The Elgen only killed when their foe had no value. Jaime had value. They would torture him for information. They would break him and learn about the voice. They would know everything. Our cause would be lost.

Then I noticed something else. Something on the ground next to him. The small black remote to the robotic guns had fallen out of his pocket.

“Tessa,” I whispered.

Only her eyes moved toward me. Her cheeks were stained with tears mixed with dirt.

I struggled to take a deep breath. “No matter what happens, don’t move a muscle. Not a muscle. Understand?”

I gestured with my eyes to the remote.

She followed my gaze to the device, then looked back at me. She looked scared but blinked in understanding.

On my stomach, I inched my way toward Jaime. If I could get close enough, I could roll over onto the remote and activate it with my fingers. Moving was slow and painful, and I had to rest after each exertion, hoping that the guards didn’t notice me and that the other

guards didn't finish their search before I got to Jaime. I was about two feet from the remote when the rest of the guards emerged from the tents, their arms loaded with papers and equipment.

"We've found a treasure trove, gentlemen," the captain said, his arms laden with boxes.

Then one of the guards glanced over at me. "What's he doing?"

"He's going for that thing," another said, pointing to the remote.

"What is that?" the captain asked. "Someone get that."

With everything I had, I rolled onto my back over the remote.

"Get him!" the captain shouted.

Slightly arching my back, I got the remote in my hands and moved it around in my fingers. As the first guard reached me, I pressed the button. The entire campsite exploded with machine-gun fire.

"Ambush!" a guard shouted, before falling to the ground riddled with bullets. The sound of bullets whistled past me, one so close that it caught a flap of my shirt, ripping the side of it open.

The guards shouted in panic, making their situation worse as they went for their weapons to combat their unseen assaulters. The firing probably lasted less than twenty seconds, but felt much, much longer. I closed my eyes until the firing stopped, the stench of smoke falling low to the ground. I fought coughing. I dared not even move my head enough to look around to see if anyone was left. I was afraid to look at Jaime and Tessa.

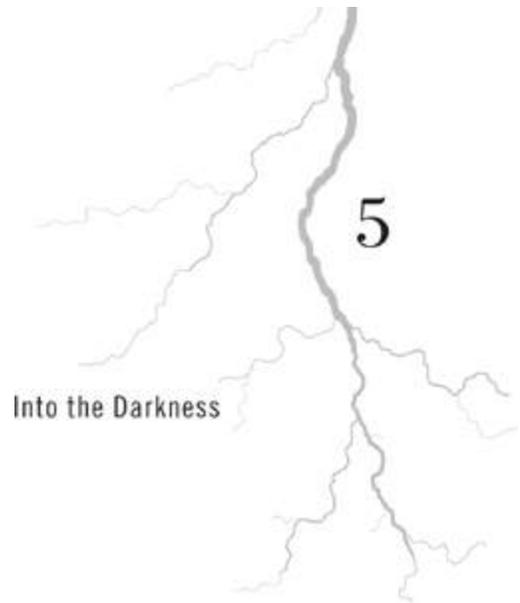
When it had been quiet for nearly thirty seconds, I pushed the remote button again, then slowly raised my head enough to see the turret. The red light above the gun was off. I breathed out in relief, then fell back again, my body racked with pain. The Elgen guards were lying all around me, but no one was moving.

I looked back at Tessa. She was shaking.

"It's off," I croaked.

She tried to speak but couldn't. She was drenched with sweat and her blouse looked as if she had showered in it. The RESAT was set way too high. I worried that if I couldn't get it turned off soon that it might stop her heart. But I could barely move myself and I doubted that I could cut myself loose, even if I could wriggle myself to the nearest guard and unlatch his knife.

That left Jaime. I had to get the dart out of him. I rolled over again, then pushed myself up over him. I felt around until I found the dart, clasped it with my fingers, then rolled off, collapsing on the other side of him. I had the dart. Now he just needed to wake up.



It was nearly a half hour before Jaime stirred. About five minutes before Jaime woke, Tessa began convulsing, and then her eyes rolled back into her head and she passed out. I struggled back to her and even tried to kick the RESAT, but I was too weak.

Jaime groaned, then his eyes opened.

“Jaime,” I said.

He looked at me.

“Help.”

He sat up and looked around at the fallen guards. “What happened?”

“Turn this off,” I gasped.

He walked on his knees over to me. His hands were still bound behind his back.

“I can unfasten it,” Jaime said.

“No. If they’re unfastened without being turned off, they power up to full. It could kill me.”

“How do you turn it off?”

“The guard right there put it on me. He should have the control.”

Jaime crawled over to him and felt through his pockets. “I think I found it.”

“Push it,” I said.

My RESAT powered down. I took a deep breath, then pulsed as hard as I could, melting my wristbands. Then I crawled over to Carvelle and turned off Tessa’s RESAT. She immediately gasped for air, as if she’d just come up from under water. I detached the machine and threw it into the jungle, then put my head against her chest. To my relief her heart was beating.

“Cut me loose,” Jaime said.

I stood up and walked over to him. Careful not to touch him, I grabbed his bands and melted through them.

“*Gracias*,” he said. He stretched out his arms, then rubbed his wrists. “*Muchas gracias*.”

I went back to Tessa. Her eyes were still closed. I gently rubbed her face, wiping the mud off her cheeks. Her eyelids fluttered, then opened. She looked into my eyes, still too weak to speak.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She took another few breaths, then said softly, “Yeah.”

“Let me take care of your bands.” I grabbed her bands and pulsed. With the enhancement of Tessa’s returning power the band didn’t melt, it vaporized. She brought her hands to her face and began sobbing. I put my arms around her and she fell against me, her face buried against my chest. When she had settled a little, I asked, “Are you okay?”

“I thought I was going to die,” she said.

“What happened?” Jaime asked. “How are the Elgen guards all dead?”

I turned back to him. “Your remote fell out of your pocket. I pushed it.”

Jaime looked at me with admiration. “You are very clever,” he said. “Very, very clever.” He looked at the radio and papers scattered around the campsite and his expression turned grave. “Were we compromised?”

“I don’t know. I heard them say that they didn’t have radio coverage here.”

“*Madre de Dios*,” he said. “*Esquivar una bala*. We were lucky. We need to get out of here. The Elgen usually travel like *lobos*. And their

radios have tracking devices. We need to leave before these guards are found missing.”

“Where do we go?”

“We need to radio the voice,” Jaime said. “But we cannot carry the tower. We will have to find a mountain.”

“Where?”

“West of here. It is also in the direction of the mountain pass the army will take to Lima.”

“How long will it take us to get there?”

“To the mountain it is several days without packs. But we have much to carry. The radio and decoder are very heavy. I will need a gun and ammunition. And we will need food.” He sighed. “It took me a month to carry all this in. We must leave in minutes. We must burn everything we do not take.”

“But won’t they see the smoke?” Tessa said.

“Yes, but it is too much for us to carry,” Jaime said. “We must take that chance and be gone before they arrive.”

“I’ll start the fire,” I said.

“No, we must be ready to go before we start a fire. In case they are near.”

“What do we need to do?” Tessa asked, forcing herself to her feet.

“Help me pack the supplies,” he said to Tessa. “Michael, the Elgen have helped us. Please gather what they have dropped into a pile. Then we will soak it with gasoline.”

“On it,” I said.

Jaime and Tessa disappeared into the tent while I walked around the camp and picked up all the papers and books the Elgen had already brought out. I piled them in the center of the clearing, then dragged some logs over and made a fire pit.

As I was finishing, Jaime and Tessa came out carrying three large backpacks. Jaime took two of the guards’ utility belts and fastened them around his waist. I took one of the backpacks from Jaime, and we carried the packs outside the clearing. I turned back toward the camp. “Are we ready to start the fire?”

“Sí,” Jaime said.

Laying down my pack, I went back and emptied three five-gallon cans of gasoline over the pit. Then I created a lightning ball and threw it onto the pile. It burst into flames as tall as me. Black smoke began rising above the canopy.

“*Pronto*,” Jaime said. “We have just revealed our location. We must go.”

I started to put my pack back on when I had an idea. “Wait. The turret guns.”

“What about them?” Jaime said.

“Can you put them on a delay?”

“A delay? Why?” Then a knowing smile lit his face. “Ah, *entiendo*.” He went over and punched something in on the sentries’ computer. As he returned he picked up the remote, pushed it, then tossed it into the bushes. “Thirty seconds should be enough.”

“What did he do?” Tessa asked.

“He put the sentry on a delay. That way if an Elgen patrol walks into the camp, it will give them time so they’ll all be within range.”

“You are clever,” Tessa said.

“Come, clever boy,” Jaime said. “*Vámonos!*”



Hiking through the thick of the jungle was difficult and exhausting, especially after all we had been through. The jungle was hot and wet, as were we, though most of the moisture that soaked our clothing was probably our own sweat.

About an hour after leaving our camp, we heard the firing of the sentry guns.

“Sounds like the Elgen found our camp,” Tessa said.

“Or a monkey,” I said.

“Poor monkeys,” Tessa said.

We walked the rest of the day and continued hiking at night, our trail lit by Tessa’s glow and mine. Jaime knew the jungle well and, with a compass and machete, kept us moving at an exhausting pace. It must have been at least two in the morning when Tessa suddenly stopped walking. “I’ve got to stop. I can’t walk any more.”

“Me too,” I said. “I’m exhausted.”

Jaime looked at us. “Okay. We can sleep for a few hours. But not too long.”

Tessa shrugged off her pack and dropped it on the ground. “Better than nothing,” she said.

I took off my pack too. My shoulders were chafed from where its straps dug into my skin. "Do we have anything to sleep on?"

"The tent and tarp are in her pack," Jaime said. "It is big enough for two." He took off his own pack, checked for insects, then sat down on the ground against a tree.

"What about you?" I said to him.

"I must stand guard," he said. "We cannot take chances."

I felt bad for him. I knew he was exhausted too. "Thank you," I said.

"It is my job," he replied.

Tessa opened her pack and brought out a small vinyl tent and a rolled-up tarp. There were no blankets, which, considering how warm the jungle was at night, weren't necessary.

With Jaime's help, we set up the tent, then Tessa and I climbed inside. I took off my shirt, then Tessa and I spread out the tarp and lay down. The ground was warm and spongy.

"I can't believe how loud the jungle is at night," I said.

"That's when most things hunt," Tessa said. "Or flee."

"Including us," I said. I breathed out heavily. "It's hard to believe it's just been one day. We've escaped the Peruvian army in an Amazonian tribe's canoe, hiked through the jungle, been captured by the Elgen, destroyed our camp, and fled into the jungle. That's like a thousand times more than what had happened to me my entire middle school years in Meridian, Idaho."

"I could use a little more dull," Tessa said. She looked at me. "Do you think we'll ever have normal lives?"

"If Hatch has his way, normal won't be what we think it is."

"What do you mean?"

"He wants to change the world."

"One person can't change the world," Tessa said.

"Of course they can," I said. "Every idea starts with just one person."

"You're right." She was quiet for a moment, then she said, "How do you think the Elgen found us?"

"Probably el-readers," I said.

“I forgot they had those,” she said. “The guards once used them to find Torstyn when he was out hunting.” She frowned. “That means they could still track us.”

“That’s probably why Jaime is pushing us so hard.” I looked at her. “Don’t worry about it. They got lucky last time. This is a big jungle, and they don’t have helicopters anymore. We’re just a needle in a very big green haystack.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said. She closed her eyes. “Good night, Michael.”

“Night, Tessa,” I said.

“Thank you for saving my life today.”

* * *

It was still dark when Jaime woke me.

“We must go,” he said.

It took me a moment to remember where I was. The jungle was still impossibly noisy with the sounds of insects and wildlife. I sat up and yawned. “Did you sleep?” I asked.

“No. I will sleep tonight.”

I gently shook Tessa, who fought opening her eyes. “What?” she said angrily.

“*Vámonos!*” Jaime said.

“What?”

“It’s time to go,” I said.

She opened her eyes. “We just went to sleep like two minutes ago.”

“It has been three hours,” Jaime said. “I am sorry, but we must keep going. We must stay ahead of the Elgen.”

“Even Elgen sleep,” she said, rolling back over. “Wake me when there’s a sun.”

Jaime looked at me helplessly.

I put my hand on her back and shook her. “C’mon, Tessa. We better do what he says.”

Still nothing.

Frustrated, Jaime said, “You can sleep after you are dead.”

I turned and looked at him.

“Is this not an American thing to say?” Jaime said.

“Not really.” I shook her again. “C’mon, Tessa.”

After a moment she breathed out heavily. “All right already.” She sat up and rubbed her eyes, then looked around. “It’s still night.”

“No, it is very early morning,” Jaime said.

“You’re a glass half full kind of guy, aren’t you?” Tessa said.

Jaime just looked at her. “What?”

“It could be worse,” I said. “Jaime hasn’t slept at all.”

She frowned. “Sorry. I’m just grouchy when I don’t get enough sleep.”

We folded our tarp and tent, returned them to Tessa’s pack, then started off again.

The route we cut ran parallel with the river. It would have been much easier and faster to walk along the bank, but we kept our distance from the water. It wasn’t long before I discovered why. Shortly before the sun came up we stopped to rest on the crest of a hill. Jaime left us for a few minutes, then returned.

“Be very quiet,” he said. He led me to where the hill started to slope toward the river. Peering out between the trees, I could make out about a quarter mile south of our vantage point, the Río de Madre de Dios below us, its pale brown water shimmering beneath the moon’s glow. Jaime touched his ear, and then I heard it. Somewhere in the distance was the whine of an outboard motor. A moment later he pointed and whispered, “Look.”

A motorboat filled with Elgen guards sped by. They held spotlights and guns, both of which they panned against the banks.

“They are patrolling the river,” Jaime said. “It is the second Elgen boat I have seen.”

“As long as they stay on the river, we’re okay, right?”

He turned and looked at me. “We still must cross the river to get to the highway.”

I looked back down at the wide river. “We have to swim across that?”

He nodded. “Sí.”

“Aren’t there, like, alligators and piranhas in there?”

“And snakes,” Jaime said.

“At least we’ve got that to look forward to,” I said.

When we got back to our camp, Tessa was sitting on a log eating some jerky.

“*Vámonos!*” I said.

“Oh please, not you too,” she said. “It’s bad enough hearing it from him.” She shrugged on her pack, then stood. “Where’d you go?”

“Jaime wanted to show me the river. The Elgen are patrolling it.”

“For a moment I thought maybe you guys had left me.”

“Thought or *hoped?*” I asked.

“Why would I hope you would leave me?”

“So you could sleep.”

“I’ll sleep after I’m dead,” she said.

* * *

We hiked all day, taking only a few short breaks to eat and drink. Jaime said little and even though he hadn’t slept, kept us going at a brisk pace. Tessa was stronger than she looked, and, in spite of our difficulty getting her up, once she was walking she just kept on. By twilight I could see that Jaime was finally starting to lose it. As the sun set I grabbed his arm.

“You need to sleep,” I said.

He looked almost confused with weariness. “We must keep on.”

“We’ll be okay,” I said. “You can’t keep walking like this forever.”

He looked around a moment, then said, “Okay, Mr. Michael. We will camp here. I will take the first watch.”

“No. You need to sleep. We all do.”

He looked at me anxiously.

“Look, no one is going to find us. I couldn’t find me here.”

Finally he took a deep breath and said, “Okay. Okay.”

We found a dark thicket of trees where we set up our tent and covered it with leaves and vines. By the time we were done you could have walked over it and not seen it. Then Jaime gathered dead leaves and threw them in a circle around the camp.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“If someone comes near, it will wake us.”

“As tired as I am,” I said, “ I don’t think dynamite would wake me.”

“There’s no way dynamite would wake me,” Tessa said.

All three of us climbed into the tent, and Jaime pulled a cover of leaves down over the tent flap, sealing us in. It was a two-man tent (Tessa joked, “It’s okay; there are only two men, right?”), and it was cramped with three, but it was also cozy and dry. Not surprisingly Jaime was asleep within minutes of lying down, which was unfortunate since he snored loudly. After one especially loud snort, Tessa laughed. “So much for the camouflage.”

Even with Jaime’s snoring, Tessa also fell asleep quickly. Her face was next to mine, and for a moment I just looked at her. It was strange how little I really knew about her yet how close I felt to her. Hard times will do that. As I looked into her beautiful face, I wondered about Taylor. I wondered if the soldiers were hurting her. The thought of it made me twitch. I pushed it out of my mind. There was nothing I could do about it now, and there would be plenty of time to worry about that later. And now, in our nylon cave, for the first time in a long while, I felt safe. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

* * *

The sun was already up when I woke. From the look of it, it had been up for quite a while. I felt more rested than I had in days. Tessa was already awake and looking at me.

“Hey, handsome,” she said. “You gonna sleep all day?”

“If I can,” I said, rolling over.

“Sorry, not an option. You can sleep after you’re dead.”

I grinned as I sat up. “Where’s Jaime?”

“He went to find water. He said to give this to you for breakfast if you ever woke.” She handed me a box with a sweet roll and dried bananas and papaya. “You’re gonna love that sweet roll. Jaime called it castana bread. I was tempted to eat yours and tell you that we were eating monkey brains for breakfast.”

I raked my hair back from my face. “Yeah? What stopped you?”

“No idea,” she said.

We folded up the tarp and had begun taking down the tent when Jaime returned.

“*Buen día, hermanos,*” Jaime said. “I found water.” He handed me a wet, cold canteen. I passed it on to Tessa, who drank thirstily.

“Oh, it’s cold,” she said.

“*Sí.* I found a spring.”

She handed the canteen back to me. The water was not only cold, it was sweet and delicious. “Good water,” I said.

“Good water in the Amazon if you can find it,” Jaime said.

I screwed the lid back on the canteen. “What’s on the schedule today?”

“We are close to a mountain,” Jaime said. “This afternoon we will set up the radio.”

The thought of this encouraged me. “And talk to the voice?”

“That is my hope,” Jaime said.

“Then let’s get going,” I said. “*Vámonos!*”

“*Vámonos!*” Jaime repeated.

“I still hate that word,” Tessa said.

We finished breaking down the tent, repacked our gear, then set off again. Even though the hike was mostly uphill, we all felt so much better having slept that it seemed easy. We reached the mountain’s peak around three in the afternoon. From our new vantage point we could see above the forest canopy.

“This is the place we will set up our camp,” Jaime said.

Tessa and I put up the tent while Jaime worked on reassembling the radio. When we had finished, Tessa went inside to rest and I went to see if Jaime needed any help. He looked up at me as I approached.

“Anything I can do?” I asked.

“*Sí.* I need you to climb a tree as high as you can with this,” he said, holding out a coil of wire.

I took the wire. “What is it for?”

“It is the antenna for our radio. I would do it myself, but I weigh too much to reach the treetop.”

“No problem,” I said. I surveyed the trees around us until I decided on the one that looked most scalable, then I tied the end of the wire around a belt loop of my pants. “Wish me luck.”

“Be careful,” Jaime said. “The branches may be wet. Do not fall.”

“Not planning on it,” I said.

The tree’s trunk was about four feet wide, and its bark was smooth and gray. I climbed up about fifty feet before the branches were too thin to support me.

“How’s this?” I shouted down to Jaime, who was now standing with Tessa at the base of the tree looking up.

He put his finger over his lips, then gave me a thumbs-up. I tied the wire as high above me as I could, then I climbed back down the tree. It was much darker below as the sun was beginning to set.

“You’re practically a monkey,” Tessa said. “I’m impressed.”

“I was always climbing the trees around my apartment,” I said. I turned to Jaime. “Sorry I shouted. I just forgot.”

“We must be careful,” he said. “The Elgen are hunting. I do not think they are close, but I have been wrong before.”

“Can we call the voice now?”

He glanced down at his wristwatch. “In a little while,” he said. “Now we should eat.”

We walked back to the tent. “What’s for dinner?” I asked.

“Sandwiches,” Tessa said.

“Again?” I said. “No pizza?”

She smiled as she handed out the sandwiches. “I almost forgot that pizza existed. How would that be right now—a thick, hot, cheesy slice of pizza?”

“Heavenly,” I said. “With a chocolate shake.”

“Now you’re just torturing me,” she said.

We ate for a moment in silence.

Then Jaime said, “We have pizza in Peru.”

“Is it any good?” Tessa asked.

“I think so. But not so good as American pizza.”

Just talking about it made my mouth water. I didn’t think we could be farther from a real pizza. Suddenly my sandwich didn’t taste as good.

“What do you like on your pizza?” I asked Jaime.

“Sausage and olives,” he said.

“And you?” I asked Tessa.

“Veggies. I used to be a vegetarian,” she said. “But that was before the jungle. What about you?”

“Pepperoni,” I said.

“Did you know that in Italy, pepperoni is not what you think it is?” Tessa said. “It means ‘little peppers.’”

“Like hot peppers?” Jaime asked.

She nodded. “Green peppers.”

“Then what’s pepperoni?” I asked.

“*Salame*,” she said. “Americans in Italy always get that wrong.”

“You’ve been to Italy?” I asked.

“Of course. I used to be part of Hatch’s family,” she said. “I’ve been everywhere.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding. “I keep forgetting that you used to be one of them.”

She spun at me. “One of *them*? What did you mean by that?”

I was caught off guard by her reaction. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Don’t judge me,” she said angrily. “I was nine years old when they took me. If they had found you at that age, you would have been one of *them* too.”

“I wasn’t judging you,” I said.

“It sounded like it,” she said.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Jaime looked back and forth between us, then down at his watch. “It is time,” he said. “We can radio now.”

Tessa relaxed a bit. I was grateful for the interruption.

We finished eating, then Jaime pulled a small LED flashlight from his pocket and lit our path as we walked back to the radio. He sat down in front of it. “Michael, you sit here,” he said, motioning to his left side. I sat down next to him. He handed me the radio’s plug. “Take this. But do not pulse too strong. You could blow up the radio.” He turned to Tessa. “Do not make him more electric.”

“I’ll try not to,” she said. She stepped a few feet back from me and sat down.

Jaime handed me a headset. “Put this on.”

Jaime and I both put on headsets, and then he nodded for me to begin. I lightly pulsed and the digital readouts on the radio lit up.

“Less electricity,” he said.

I reduced my pulse. Jaime turned a few switches, then dialed in a code. The sound of static burst over my headset. Jaime lifted the microphone to his mouth.

“Lightning Rod, this is Southern Cross. Over.”

There were three beeps, then a voice said, “Southern Cross, we read you. Please confirm.”

“*Diez, uno, uno, uno, nueve, seis, dos.*”

“Confirmed. One moment, please.”

There was a pause, then the voice I recognized came over the radio. “Southern Cross, please give us an update.”

“We are in the jungle, but safe.”

“Have you any jewels?”

“A diamond and a tourmaline.”

“Tourmaline? This is unexpected, but very good news.”

“Yes, it was a surprise.”

“Have you encountered any resistance?”

“We escaped an attack. We were forced to abandon our base.”

“Was protocol followed?”

“Yes, sir. Everything was destroyed or carried with us.”

“Good. We have learned that Hatch has been summoned back to the base. The chairman is very displeased with him. We believe he will be terminated.”

“*Madre de Dios!*” Jaime exclaimed. “This is *mucha* reason for a fiesta.”

I grabbed the microphone. “This is Michael. Do you have my mother?”

“Do not speak your name on air,” the voice said sharply.

“Sorry,” I said.

A moment later the voice said, “She is safe.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“She’s not here. But I can arrange for you to speak.”

“Do you know anything about the rest of my friends?”

“Your friends have been captured by the Peruvian military. They are being held under tight security in Puerto Maldonado. We expect that they will be transported to Lima for trial.”

Jaime looked at me and nodded in confirmation.

“We’ve got to rescue them,” I said.

“We don’t believe that a rescue attempt is advisable. At this time, our best option is diplomacy. We have connections in the consulate.”

“You can get them released?”

The voice paused. “We’ll do our best.”

“Your best? What does that mean?”

“I’ll be honest with you; it’s a long shot. But it’s certainly not as risky as attempting to defeat an entire brigade of the Peruvian army. That would be certain suicide.”

“Suicide or not,” I said, “I have to try to save them.”

“We cannot agree to that,” the voice said. “When we brought you and your friends here, we knew we were taking a big risk. But you did it—knocked out the Elgen’s largest Starxource plant, rescued your mother, and escaped. You succeeded, but there are costs to all success. You have to accept that.”

“I can’t accept abandoning my friends. I’m going after them.”

“We forbid it,” he said. “Taking on . . .”

I didn’t wait for him to finish. I took off the headset and handed it to Jaime. Jaime looked at me with an annoyed expression but continued listening. A moment later he said, “He is not listening. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Over.” Jaime switched off the radio.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He said I should do my best to talk you out of it.”

“Good luck with that,” I said.

“But Michael—”

“I’m going to rescue them,” I said angrily. “Are you with me or not?”

Jaime just looked at me. Tessa looked down, avoiding my eye contact.

My face began twitching, and I held my hand up to my cheek. After a moment I said, “Fine. Then I’m going without you. Both of you.”

Jaime crossed his arms. "How will you go without me? You do not know the way."

"I know the road is across the river. I'll just keep walking until I find it."

"And if they catch you?"

I looked him in the eye. "I'll tell them everything I know about the voice."

Jaime flinched. "You would not."

"This is war; you're either my friend or my enemy. There is no middle ground. So which is it?"

"We are your friend. We want the same thing as you."

"I don't think so," I said.

Jaime sat thoughtfully for a moment, then breathed out slowly. "I will take you to the road, and I will wait for you. But if you fail, you must promise to not speak of us."

"Agreed," I said. I turned to Tessa. "Are you with me?"

She frowned. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

She didn't answer. Angry, I walked back to the tent.

Tessa followed me. She grabbed my arm. "Michael, I'm sorry. It's just—this isn't my fight."

"How is this not your fight? This is your world too, and the Elgen are trying to take it. If we're not willing to stand up to them, who will?"

"The Elgen are big, and we're just . . . us. We can't stop them, we can't even slow them down. You're crazy if you think you can take on an entire army. You're not Superman."

"No. I'm just crazy. But they're my friends. And I have to try."

She just stood there, speechless and staring at me.

"I don't need you," I said, turning away. "I don't need either of you." I got down on my knees and crawled into the tent.

It was a while before Jaime and Tessa got in. None of us spoke. Long after Jaime started snoring, I just lay there in the dark. My stomach was tied up in knots.

The truth was, I did need Tessa. And Jaime. But most of all I needed my friends. I missed them more than I could say.



PART 2



Rumors spread quickly through the Peruvian military force that the eight teenagers they were hunting in the jungle were more than just young terrorists. They were part of an occult group called the Electroclan and workers of black magic—a rumor that gained credence when it was discovered that some of them actually glowed in the dark.

Peruvian culture holds deeply founded superstitions, and even after the teens had surrendered, many of the soldiers refused to go near them. Others, in spite of their strict orders to bring the terrorists back alive, pleaded with their commanders to shoot the teens and bring back their lifeless bodies.

The Elgen's Elite Global Guard, who were consulting with the Peruvian army, helped spread rumors of black magic among the lower and more ignorant ranks of Peruvian soldiers, hoping that if enough of them believed it, they might pressure their superiors into turning the Electroclan over to the Elgen—which was their objective to begin with.

The chief Elgen officer working with the Peruvian military was Captain Welch, a senior member of the Elite Global Guard and third in authority to Dr. Hatch himself. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to

convince, bribe, then threaten the brigade's commander, General Panchez, into releasing the teens into Elgen custody. The general wouldn't budge. His orders came from the top. The Peruvian president himself had demanded that the Electroclan be brought in for trial. The terrorists' capture had already made international news, and the Peruvian citizens demanded justice. In actuality, justice wasn't the president's main concern—it was his approval rating. With the loss of their electricity, the country was in crisis and people wanted someone to answer for their suffering. Like all successful politicians, the president understood public opinion well enough to know that if someone's head didn't roll, his would. And the general understood that if the president's head rolled, his would roll along with it.

* * *

Even though Jack and Zeus still wanted to fight, with more than five hundred armed soldiers surrounding them, there was little they could do but surrender. Taylor was the one who had made the decision, waving a torn piece of her blouse over her head.

"We give up!" she shouted. "We surrender."

A heavily accented military officer with a megaphone shouted, "You stand up now with your hands on your head!"

"The dude can't talk," Jack said.

"They're Peruvian military," Ostin said. "They're not Elgen."

"That's good, right?" Abigail asked.

"It's not good," Ostin said. "We'll find out if it's better."

Taylor was the first to obey the order. "Don't shoot!" she shouted. She put her hands on her head and slowly stood, followed by the rest: Ostin, Jack, Zeus, Abigail, McKenna, Ian, and Wade. Once they were all standing, the soldiers quickly closed in around them.

"Now you kneel down," the commander said when he was near. He was a stocky, bald man wearing a black beret and green camouflage.

"Make up your mind," Jack said. "Stand up or kneel down."

"Just kneel," Taylor said.

When the Electroclan were on their knees, two patrols of Peruvian soldiers approached them carrying guns and RESAT boxes. More than

a hundred soldiers held their guns on them, while the advance team—who had never seen or used the RESATs before—fastened the machines on each youth, including Ostin, Wade, and Jack.

Then their hands were cuffed behind their backs and their legs were shackled with a twelve-inch chain dangling between the two ankle manacles. Potato sacks were put over their heads, which was disorienting for everyone except Ian, whose vision was only slightly impaired by his RESAT.

A long, nylon rope was tied around all of their waists, and they were led in a single-file line out of the jungle to the waiting army vehicles. Walking roped together and blindfolded through the thick jungle was difficult. The chains between their legs caught on rocks and tree trunks, and each of them fell more than once. Ostin fell the most, eight times, leaving dark bruises and cuts on his arms and legs.

Once they were out of the jungle, the rope connecting the teens was cut, then each of them was taken to a separate vehicle—still bound, hooded, and surrounded by soldiers.

Under heavy security, which included two tanks and more than eighty armed personnel carriers, the soldiers drove in a convoy six miles to the Puerto Maldonado jail.

The army had commandeered the Puerto Maldonado city jailhouse for the purpose of holding the terrorists. They had released twelve of the jail's fifty-seven occupants, then crowded the rest into two tiny cells so they could utilize the remaining eight cells for the new prisoners. Then they built three twelve-foot-high electric fences around the jail, which were patrolled by guard dogs and more than fifty soldiers.

The general had been warned by the Elgen that the teens had already escaped from two high-security facilities, and Panchez was taking no chances. The young terrorists would not escape him.

* * *

Upon their arrival at the jail, the teens were fingerprinted and photographed, then each was taken to a different cell. Ostin was the first to be processed, and after he was locked in his cell, he sat down

on the cool, concrete floor, swatting at mosquitoes, rubbing his bruises, and grumbling.

“I’ve never even been grounded before,” he mumbled. “Now I’m in jail. And I’m only in the ninth grade.”

Ostin had studied Peru in seventh-grade geography and, as usual, had learned everything he could about the subject—including the country’s history, Incan lore, the country’s invasion by Francisco Pizarro, the current political structure, national exports, and even its national anthem, *Himno Nacional del Perú*, which he still remembered. He also remembered that the country reserved the death penalty for acts of terrorism, which frightened him since the soldiers kept calling them “*terroristas*.”

“We didn’t do anything to them,” Ostin said, hitting the concrete wall with his fist—which he immediately regretted. “We attacked the stinking Elgen, not them. It’s not the same thing. What have they got against us?”

The cell he was being held in was a hot and humid ten-by-ten-foot square, with rough concrete walls and floor, both of which had fungus growing on them. There were thick rusted bars on the window, which had been boarded over by the army. In the corner of the room, there was a bucket for a toilet, and a single naked lightbulb hung from the ceiling.

“There’s got to be a way out of here. Think, think, think.” He rubbed his temples, which always made him think better. “We’ve got to escape. What do I know about escape? John Dillinger escaped from jail twice. Houdini. David Hoodoo . . .”

Five years earlier, when Ostin was ten, on a summer vacation trip to his aunt’s home in Las Vegas, his parents had taken him to a magic show where the magician, the Magnificent David Hoodoo, had escaped from a bank vault suspended thirty feet in the air. He had also made a fully grown African elephant disappear onstage. While the crowd applauded wildly at the illusion, it vexed Ostin that he couldn’t figure out how either trick was done. He had resolved to figure them out but never got around to it. After he returned home, he was distracted by Shark Week and a new interest in robotics.

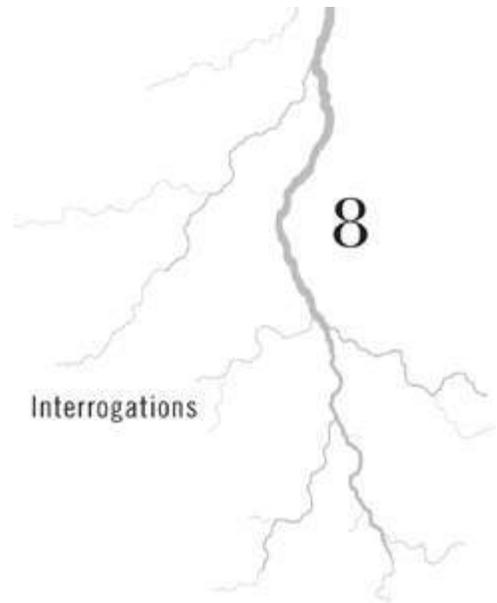
“That won’t work. The thing was staged. This isn’t.” He pounded on his RESAT. As the teens were checked into the jail, the Peruvian soldiers had removed their hoods, handcuffs, and foot shackles but had left the RESATs connected.

“Idiots,” Ostin said, looking at the box fastened to his chest. “They don’t even know what the thing does. It doesn’t work on normal people. It’s not a Taser—it’s the opposite of a Taser.” He examined the box. “Wait a minute. . . . Does this thing work like a Taser?” He reached around and unfastened the box from his chest, which was no more difficult than removing a backpack. Red and green diodes began flashing wildly on the plastic-coated box, followed by a soft, high-pitched squeal. The RESAT was designed to activate if it was tampered with, but for a normal human, it was as pointless as trying to drown a fish. He used the metal clip of the RESAT’s buckle to pry off its back, then set the plate aside and examined the circuitry.

“Yep, there’s the capacitor. It’s huge. I bet it holds a million volts. What’s this . . . oh right, of course. Hmm, I bet if I . . .”

It took him less than half an hour to figure out how to rewire the machine. When he was done he held the wires two inches apart and electricity sparked between them.

“Mega-epic voltage,” he said. “This will blow them out of their boots.” He thought for a moment, then said, “No, it needs to do more than shock them.” He carefully reexamined the circuitry. After another five minutes he smiled. “So that’s how it does that. Clever. If I divert this right here . . . Now we’re talking.” He grinned. “Now I just need someone to test it on.”



As soon as all the teens were secured, the army began interrogations. Taylor, who they guessed to be the leader of the group, was the first to be taken from her cell. As she walked, handcuffed, out of the room she wished Michael was with her, then felt bad for thinking such a thing. *No. Anyplace but here.*

She was escorted down the hallway by two Peruvian military police who she tried to reboot but was unable to with the RESAT sucking out most of her power—though she did get one of them to trip. At least she thought she did. He might have just been clumsy.

She was brought to the interrogation room—a small, rectangular cell with a two-way mirror on one wall. In the center of the room was a square, wooden table with two chairs facing each other. The chair closest to the door was already occupied, and as she entered she could see the back of a man's head, or at least the Elgen helmet he was wearing, the ones the Elgens always wore around her.

The soldiers walked Taylor to the empty chair, which faced the mirror. One of the soldiers pulled out the chair while the other unlocked Taylor's cuffs.

"Thank you," she said. She rubbed her wrists, which were already sore from the cuffs.

The seated man looked at her for a moment, then said softly, "Please have a seat."

Taylor glanced at the two soldiers flanking her, then slowly sat down. The two soldiers left the room. The man seated in front of her looked Peruvian, though he was taller than most of the soldiers she'd seen. He was young and, under different circumstances, she might have thought he was kind of hot. There was a pad of lined paper in front of him with a pen. The last time she'd sat down with an adult like this was during her faculty interview for varsity cheerleader.

For a moment the man just stared at her, as if sizing her up. Then, to her surprise, he smiled at her. "Welcome," he said. He put out his hand, but Taylor didn't take it. He held it out for a few seconds, then cocked his head and put his hand back in his lap.

"My name is Cesar," he said. "What is your name?"

He spoke almost without an accent, and Taylor thought he sounded too pleasant for what he was doing. Taylor just pursed her lips and stared at him. After a full minute of silence he said, "Your name?"

"You already know who I am," Taylor said. "If you didn't, you wouldn't be wearing that helmet."

"That is true," the man said. "I just want to hear you say it."

"I'm not a toy," she said. She turned her head away from him.

"I don't think you're a toy. I'm just trying to develop a . . . rapport."

Taylor didn't respond. The man looked at her for a moment, then said, "You're not going to talk to me?"

She didn't answer.

"Could you please tell me where you're from?" He shifted in his chair. When Taylor didn't answer he said, "From your accent I am guessing that you're from the United States; perhaps somewhere in the west."

"Why do you keep asking me things you already know?"

The man looked at her for a moment, then stood up and walked over to Taylor's side and crouched down next to her. He spoke softly, just above a whisper. "You know that you're being watched and recorded. I am not going to hurt you. But if you don't cooperate with me, then they'll just get someone else who will make you cooperate—"

someone with more . . . forceful methods. Perhaps one of the Elgen's people."

Taylor still didn't look at him. "So it's the good cop, bad cop routine," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's on every cop show in America. One of you plays the nice cop who acts like he cares about me, while the other plays the bad cop who wants to bust my chops, so I confide to the good cop."

He nodded. "I see. Good cop, bad cop. I'll have to remember that. But this is not an American TV show. The Elgen corporation is very influential, and they want you very badly. I'm not with them; I'm with the Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional. We are called SIN."

"You call yourself SIN? Is that supposed to make me trust you?"

"I suppose in English that it is an unfortunate acronym. But we are like your CIA. We collect information about groups that are a threat to our country."

She looked at him incredulously. "You think *we're* a threat to your country?"

"You and your colleagues *are* a threat to my country," he replied. "So you can talk to me, or you can talk to someone who is . . . not me."

Taylor just looked at him for a moment, then said, "What do you want to know?"

He walked back to his seat and picked up his pen. "We'll begin with your name. What is your name?"

"Taylor."

"Taylor what?"

"Taylor Swift."

He looked at her coolly. "Okay, Miss Swift. What state in the United States are you from?"

"Utah."

"Utah," he repeated. "Tall mountains. Who sent you here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who sent you to Peru? Someone wanted the power plant destroyed; who was it? A rival corporation? A foreign military power?"

“It wasn’t anyone. We didn’t come down to destroy the power plant. We came down because the Elgen were keeping my friend’s mother captive.”

“What friend?”

Taylor looked down for a moment, then said, “Just a friend.”

“Someone we have in captivity?”

She looked at him. “Yes.”

“Which one?”

“Ostin,” she said.

He wrote something on the pad.

“How did you get to Peru?”

“We flew.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“Which airline?”

Taylor swallowed. “Uh, Delta.”

“We have checked the records of every airline that flies into Peru, and there is no record of you and your friends ever arriving.”

“We drove,” Taylor said.

“You drove to Peru?”

Taylor nodded.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded again.

“How long did it take you to drive from . . . Utah?”

“A little over a week.”

“Really?”

She swallowed. “Give or take a few days.”

“Where are the cars you drove?”

“We sold them once we got down here.”

He tapped his pad with his pen. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“To whom?”

“I don’t know who they were. Just some guys we met. I think they were probably drug dealers because they paid in cash. They didn’t want us to ask a lot of questions.”

“And where are your passports?”

“They took them from us.”

“The . . . drug dealers who bought your car?”

“Yes. I mean, no. The passport people.”

“The passport people?”

“Why do you keep repeating everything I say?”

“I just want to be sure that I am understanding you. The passport people took your passport. You mean the passport agents at the border.”

“If that’s what you call them.”

He nodded. “They don’t usually keep them.”

“They kept ours.”

“Did you cross the Panama Canal by ferry, or did you just drive around it?”

Taylor squinted. “We drove around it.” Then added, “It was faster.”

He nodded. “I’m sure it was.” He looked at her for a moment, then stood. “Okay, Taylor Swift. Thank you for your cooperation. One last question.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you plan on holding a concert while you’re in Peru?”

Taylor blushed.

“But if you drove from the U.S. to Peru in one week, you should be a race-car driver instead of a famous singer, because it would take at least three weeks if you never stopped. But what is most impressive is that you drove around the Panama Canal. I’ve heard of people walking on water, but driving on water is even more miraculous.”

He leaned forward. “I’m disappointed in you, Taylor Ridley from Meridian, Idaho. Aside from your first name, I don’t believe you’ve told me a single truth since we began. I don’t think you have any idea how much trouble you’re in. You’ve cost this country millions and millions of dollars.”

“Bill me,” Taylor said.

The man grinned. “They just might, you know. The cost will be your life.” He leaned forward. “You don’t really understand how serious this is, do you? You and your friends have been branded terrorists. The punishment for terrorism in this country is execution.”

Taylor’s eyes began to well up. But still she didn’t speak.

“All right, then,” he said, turning toward the door. “We’ll see how you do with the Elgen interrogators.” He turned to go.

“Wait,” Taylor said. “I’m sorry.”

He stopped and looked back. “You’re sorry?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what am I supposed to do with that?”

“I’ll tell you the truth.”

He looked at her for a moment, then said, “Will you?”

She exhaled slowly. “I’ll tell you what I can. I promise.”

“We’ll see what good your promise is.”

“What I told you about my friend’s mother was true. That’s why we came.”

“Which friend?”

Taylor swallowed. “Someone you don’t know. Look, you need to know something. You’ve got the wrong guys.”

“You’re telling me that you didn’t blow up the power plant?”

“I’m telling you that the Elgen are the bad guys. They’re not here to help your country. They’re here to take it over. Once they control all your electricity, they will control your country. We did you a favor.” Taylor looked into his eyes. “I’m telling you the truth. We didn’t come to blow up an electricity plant. We’re a bunch of teenagers. At home I’m a cheerleader. We only came to Peru because they kidnapped my boyfriend’s mother.”

“Who kidnapped your boyfriend’s mother?”

“The Elgen.”

He just looked at her. “And why would they do that?”

“Because they were trying to catch us.”

“Then you shouldn’t have come.”

“I know. But it was his mother.”

He nodded. “So, did you find her?”

“Yes.”

He looked at her skeptically. “And where is your boyfriend’s mother now?”

“She got away.”

“With your boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“What is your boyfriend’s name?”

She hesitated. Finally she said, “Michael.”

“Michael what?”

“Michael Vey.”

He stared at her for a moment. “I’m supposed to believe this?”

“Believe what you want to believe,” Taylor said. “But why would a bunch of high school kids come to Peru to blow up an electricity plant?”

He crossed his arms. “That’s what I’m trying to find out. But you haven’t told me anything that makes sense.”

“I’ve told you the truth. You can believe me now, or you can believe me after the Elgen take over your country.”

“My country. Speaking of which, how did you get into the country?”

She hesitated.

“I need to know.”

She paused a moment longer, then slowly breathed out. “There are people besides us who know how bad the Elgen are. They flew us down in their plane.”

“What people?”

“I don’t know anything about them.”

“I’m sorry, that’s not a good enough answer.”

“I’m telling you the truth. They only talk to us by cell phone. I don’t know who they are. The guy calls himself ‘the voice.’”

The man rested his chin in his hand and looked at her.

“You have to believe me.”

The man nodded. “I believe you.”

Taylor frowned. “You have to help us. The Elgen are bad, bad people.”

He paused a moment longer, then said, “Thank you. I’ll pass that on to my superiors. That’s all for now.” He reached back and rapped his knuckles on the door. “*Terminamos ya.*”

“What are you going to do with us?” Taylor asked.

“You’ll be taken to Lima, where you will go on trial for terrorism.”

Taylor wiped a tear from her cheek. “I told you, we weren’t attacking your country. We were fighting the Elgen.”

“What you did was a direct assault on our country.”

“If they find us guilty, what will they do to us?”

“If you’re lucky, they’ll keep you in prison until you’re a very old woman.”

The thought of it sent chills through her. “That doesn’t sound lucky,” she said.

“It is compared to the alternative.”

“The alternative?”

The man looked her in the eyes. “You’ll never be an old woman.” The man stood and opened the door. “*Traigame el siguiente.*”

* * *

Behind the two-way mirror an Elgen captain lifted his phone and said into it, “Four, two, Charley, Alpha, Vixen, Omega.”

“Go ahead,” someone returned.

“This is Captain Moyes. I need to speak immediately with Captain Welch.”

“Just a moment, sir.”

A minute later Captain Welch answered. “What is it, Moyes?”

“We’ve just finished the first interrogation.”

“Which one?”

“Sixteen. Tara’s twin.”

“Anything interesting?”

“The most vital information we’ve gotten yet. The kids aren’t alone.”

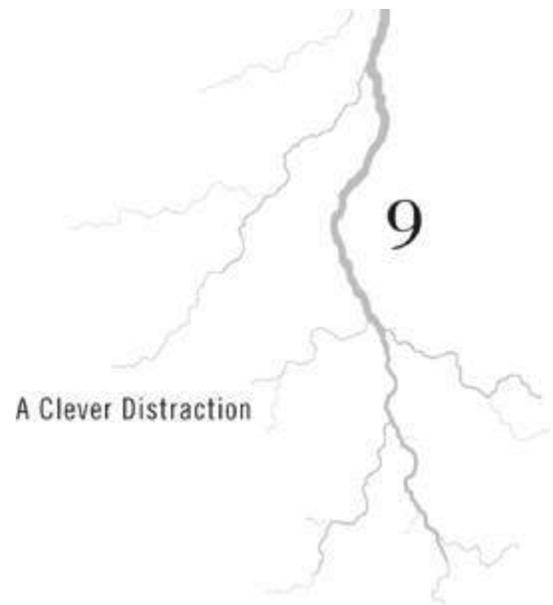
“What do you mean, they’re not alone?”

“Someone’s helping them. They’re part of a resistance.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well done. I’ll alert Dr. Hatch.”



An hour after Ostin had been incarcerated, a single soldier walked into his cell. Ostin was lying on his back on the thin, flea-infested cot, staring at the cracked ceiling. The guard had no gun but held a wooden truncheon in one hand. “Stand up,” he said.

“*Qué pasa?*” Ostin said, slowly rising.

“Stand up. *Hazlo!*”

“Okay,” he said. “Don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

The guard looked at him without comprehension.

Ten minutes earlier, Ostin had reattached the RESAT to his chest, and when he was arm’s length from the soldier, he tapped on the box. “Can you turn this thing down? It’s too strong.”

“No. Put your hands in front of you.”

Concealing the RESAT wires in his hands, Ostin held his hands out. As the guard brought the cuffs near, Ostin touched the bare-ended wires to the guard’s arms. There was a loud snap of electricity, and the man collapsed to the ground without a scream.

Ostin looked down at him. “I told you it was too strong.” Ostin crouched down next to the man to make sure he was out. “So that’s what it’s like to be Michael.” He carefully rolled the wires back, then quickly undressed the guard and put on his uniform. The guard was

an inch shorter than Ostin, and the uniform fit well except for being a little snug in the waist.

When Ostin had finished changing, he handcuffed the guard's hands behind his back, stuffed the man's socks into his mouth, then wrapped a sheet around the man's head to keep him from spitting the socks out. He took the guard's key and bludgeon, peered out of his cell, and when he saw no one, walked out into the corridor.

The jail was small, a single corridor about sixty feet in length, with doors on each side. Ostin had no idea which cells his friends were being kept in, so he tried the key in the first door next to his, opened it, and quickly stepped inside. Zeus was lying on the bed, his face bent in a grimace. Sweat was beading on his forehead, stress from a RESAT that was set too high.

"Oye!" Ostin shouted.

Zeus sneered. "Eat my shorts, you ape."

"I'll pass," Ostin said, stepping closer.

Zeus looked over at him. "Ostin? How did you . . ."

Ostin took the wires from the RESAT and hooked them to Zeus's machine. "I'm going to unfasten this."

"No, don't," Zeus said. "It sets it off. It could kill me."

"Shouldn't," he said. He set his own RESAT on the bed next to Zeus. "I rewired this to counter yours. I'm ninety-nine point six percent sure that it will work."

Zeus looked at it a moment, then said, "Are you sure?"

"I just told you how sure I am." Ostin grasped the closest fastener on Zeus's RESAT, then unlatched it. The RESAT immediately lit up.

"It's powering up," Zeus said anxiously.

"I know," Ostin said. Suddenly the machine began to squeal.

"Ostin . . ."

"Does it feel different?"

"No."

"Then don't sweat it."

Zeus didn't feel it getting stronger. If anything, his pain was diminishing.

"I think it's working," Zeus said.

“For a minute,” Ostin said. “We’ve got to get it off you. The capacitor can only hold so much electricity before it will blow.”

“Now you tell me.” Zeus frantically unfastened the rest of the clips, then pushed the box away from him. He fell back against the wall and took a deep breath, groaning in relief.

“You’re welcome,” Ostin said, grabbing Zeus’s RESAT and prying off its back.

“Thank you,” Zeus said. “I’m going to blast those guys to the next city.”

“Bad idea,” Ostin said. “We’re still surrounded, and they’ve still got guns.” He yanked a few wires off the RESAT, then snapped on the back of the RESAT and gave the box back to Zeus. “Here, put it back on.”

“I’m not putting that on,” he said, looking at the flashing lights.

“It doesn’t work anymore,” Ostin said. “It just looks like it does. If you walk out there without it on, they’ll know something’s up.”

Zeus slid his arms through the straps, and Ostin clipped the fasteners back in place. He looked at Ostin. “What’s next?”

“We need to find the others. Then we’re going to capture a few soldiers, put on their uniforms, and walk the rest of us out of here. That’s the only way we’re going to get past all those guards.”

“Do you know what’s outside this place?”

“Other than like ten thousand soldiers? No. We need Ian. If there’s a weakness, I’m sure he’s already found it. Do you know what room he’s in?”

“No. I had a hood over my head when they brought me in.”

“Yeah, we all did.” Ostin walked to the cell door. “All right, I’m going to open it. When no one’s watching, I’m going to cross the hall and open the door across from us. Get ready to run.”

Ostin opened the cell door a half inch and peered out. No one was in the hall. He turned back to Zeus. “It’s clear. Come on.”

Zeus walked up behind him. Ostin looked out again, then they both ran across the hall. Ostin shoved the key in the door, unlocked the cell, and pushed the door open.

“It’s us . . . ,” he said, as the door swung open. There were at least twenty dirty and angry-looking Peruvian convicts staring at him.

“Sorry, wrong room,” Ostin said, stepping back.

“*Atacquenlos!*” a large, bearded man shouted.

“*Vámonos!*” another shouted, rushing toward Ostin.

Ostin froze in the doorway, paralyzed by fear. Zeus pushed Ostin aside and with both hands extended, blasted the approaching men. The electricity from his bolt splintered off, traveling through all of the men simultaneously, and all of them fell to the ground, one of them grasping his chest. Zeus grabbed Ostin and pulled him out of the room.

“Wrong curtain, man,” he said, pulling the door shut. They went to the next door, which Ostin, though still shaken and fumbling with the key, managed to unlock. This time he opened the door more cautiously. At first neither of them saw anyone. Then Zeus pointed to the corner. “There she is.”

Lying on her back on the concrete floor next to the far wall was McKenna. Her back was arched and her long black hair was splayed out around her. Zeus pushed Ostin inside the cell and shut the door behind them.

“McKenna,” Ostin said. Then he realized that she was convulsing. “No!” He rushed to her side. Her entire body was seized and her eyes had rolled back in her head. “It’s killing her!” Ostin shouted. “It’s too high!”

“Shut it off,” Zeus said.

Ostin fell to his knees on the ground next to her. He fastened the wires of his RESAT to hers and practically ripped the machine off of her. She immediately gasped, then fell still.

“McKenna!” Ostin shouted.

Zeus put his finger on her throat, then his ear to her heart. “It’s not beating.”

“CPR,” Ostin said. He began pressing on her chest, then listened. Then repeated. “I can’t get anything,” he said.

Zeus pulled him off her. “Stand back.”

He put his hand over McKenna’s heart. “Hold on.” He shocked her, and her entire body jumped. He put his head on her chest. Nothing. He leaned back and tried it again. “Come on, McKenna.” Her body

jumped even more. Then she groaned. He put his ear to her chest. This time he could hear her heart.

“It’s beating.”

Her eyes opened, then she began to cry.

Ostin knelt back next to her. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry.” He wiped the tears off her cheeks. She looked up at him gratefully.

When she could speak she said, “Thank you.”

“Anything for you,” he said.

“We’ve got to hurry,” Zeus said. “Before they find out we’re gone.”

“Can you stand?” Ostin asked.

“I think so,” McKenna said. “Just help me up.”

Ostin stood, and, taking her hands in his, helped her to her feet. After she was standing, her legs buckled a little and she fell into him. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her up until she could stand on her own. “Sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay,” Ostin said. “Take your time.”

Zeus looked at them impatiently. “Not a lot of time.”

“We can go,” McKenna said.

Zeus pulled open the cell door and looked out into the hallway. “It’s clear. Give me the key.” Ostin gave him the key and Zeus crossed the hallway to the next door and opened it. Inside was Ian, who in spite of the effect of his RESAT, was still able to see what was going on and was sitting up expecting him.

Zeus waved McKenna and Ostin over. Ostin took McKenna by the arm and helped her across the hallway into Ian’s cell.

“I saw you do something to this,” Ian said, touching the RESAT.

“I can disable it,” Ostin said.

“Then do it,” Ian said. “It’s killing me.”

Ostin attached the wires from his RESAT to Ian’s, then began unfastening the buckles. Ian slipped the box off, groaning in relief. “Thanks, man. I owe you.”

Ostin began dissecting the RESAT. “You’re welcome.”

“And for saving McKenna.” Ian walked over to McKenna and put his arms around her. After years of being imprisoned together in the academy’s dungeon, McKenna had become a sister to him, and he had

yelled out for help as he watched her struggling with her RESAT. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm better now," she said, glancing at Ostin.

Ostin smiled, then continued working on Ian's RESAT. When he'd rewired it, he replaced the rear panel and handed it back to him. "Here you go. It's best to keep them on."

"I get it," Ian said, rebuckling the machine.

"Where's everyone else?" Zeus asked.

Ian said, "Jack, Abigail, and Wade are in the next three cells on this side. Taylor's in the last cell on the opposite side, but she's not there. They took her down to interrogate her."

"Not good," Zeus said.

"No, it might be good," Ostin said. "It's just the opportunity we need. We'll wait in her cell for the guards to bring her back, then jump them. But we still need to get the others. Ian, you need to tell us when to move."

"Jack's in the cell next to us, then Wade, but we should get Abi first. She's in a lot of pain."

"Then let's go," Zeus said.

Following Ian, they hurried down to Abigail's cell. Abigail didn't see them come in. She was lying on the ground facing the wall, writhing in pain. Zeus ran to her side. "We're here," he said.

She rolled over to look at him, her cheeks stained with tears. "It hurts."

"I know. We'll get it off. C'mon, Ostin. Hurry!"

Ostin fastened his machine to hers, and Zeus pulled her RESAT off. She rolled onto her stomach and sobbed, while Zeus gently rubbed her back. "It sucks, you know? You can take away everyone's pain but your own."

"Are you okay?" McKenna asked, crouching down next to her.

"I think these guys are meaner than the Elgen," Abigail said.

"I don't think so," Ostin said. "I just think they don't know how to use the RESATs."

"Where'd they even get them?" Zeus asked.

"I'm sure they're a gift from the Elgen," Ian said.

“You can bet on that,” Ostin said. He stood. “We better keep moving.”

Zeus cradled Abigail in his arms and lifted her. “Thank you,” Abigail said, draping her arms around Zeus’s neck.

“What’s going on out there?” Ostin asked.

Ian said, “There’s some activity in the front, but we’re still clear. Let’s get the other two.”

Everyone but Ostin stayed in Abigail’s cell until Ostin had freed Wade, then opened Jack’s door, at which point the group gathered in Jack’s cell.

“Jack!” Wade shouted when he saw him.

“Hey, man,” Jack said. “It’s good to see you.” They guy-hugged.

Zeus walked in carrying Abigail. “What happened?” Jack asked.

“They had her RESAT set too high,” Zeus said.

“I’m gonna bust some heads,” Jack said.

“I’m with you,” Zeus said.

“Time for phase two,” Ostin said. “Ian, what’s going on outside the jail?”

“Nothing good,” Ian said. “There are thousands of soldiers. They’ve constructed three supertall barbwire fences around the jail, so even if we get out, we’d have to somehow get through the fences.”

“Then they’ve built their camp outside the fences, so after the fence we’d have to walk through the middle of thousands of soldiers.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they won’t notice us,” Zeus said sarcastically.

“They didn’t notice us at the Starxource plant,” Jack said. “We walked right through their cafeteria. If we split up . . .”

Abigail looked frightened at the prospect. “I think they would notice me. I don’t look at all like a Peruvian soldier.”

“You’ll need one of their assault masks,” Jack said. “And uniforms.”

“What we need,” Ostin said, “is a distraction. And I know where to find it.” He suddenly smiled. “Oh, this is going to be good.”

“What’s that?” McKenna asked, taking Ostin’s arm.

“We’re sitting on a powder keg just waiting for a spark,” Ostin said. “The army took all the prisoners who were already in here and shoved them all in one cell, like sardines. They’re as tightly strung as a banjo.”

“Two cells,” Ian said. “There’s one near the front, and the other is at the end of the corridor, next to Taylor’s cell.”

“Even better,” Ostin said. “So here’s the plan. I heard some of the soldiers talking on the transport here. They didn’t know I spoke Spanish so they weren’t being real discreet. The bottom line is, these guys want us alive. Someone high up has ordered it.”

“Why?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s for public relations. Maybe it’s just so they can properly hang us, but whatever the reason, they’re protecting us. So here’s my idea. We start a fire—”

“Wait, you want to start a fire while we’re still locked in here?” Abigail asked.

“Yeah. They won’t let us burn. Then, if we let out the other prisoners, and they see the smoke . . .”

“Prison riot,” Jack said.

“And they’ll have to come save us,” McKenna said.

“Exactly. Except that the ones saving us . . . are us,” Ostin said.

“You lost me,” Wade said.

“Jack you, and I will be dressed up as soldiers. We’ll be the ones rushing everyone else out of the jail to keep them safe.”

“Only one problem,” Wade said. “How do we start a fire? Rub sticks together?”

“You’re kidding, right?” McKenna said.

Wade looked at her. “Oh. Right.”

Jack shook his head. “Dude, you’re so dumb.”

Wade frowned.

“Where do we get two more soldier uniforms?” Abigail asked.

Ostin turned to Ian. “Are they still interrogating Taylor?”

“Yeah.”

“Are there soldiers with her?”

“Two of them.”

“Perfect. We hide in her cell. When they bring her back, Zeus zaps them and we take their uniforms.”

“Then we better hurry to her cell,” Ian said. “We don’t know how long the questioning will last.”

“Let’s go,” Jack said. He opened the door. “Ian, is it clear?”

Ian looked around. "Looks good."

"Stay close to the wall, people," Ostin said.

They hurried in single file down to Taylor's cell. Ostin opened the cell door, and they all went in.

"When the time comes," Ostin said, "everyone needs to stand against this wall. We don't know how far they'll actually come into the cell, and if they see one of us, we've got a problem. Zeus, as soon as the doors open, be prepared to drop them. When they're down, Jack and Wade will pull them into the cell and put on their uniforms. Ian, you've got to let us know their progress so we can be ready for them."

"I'm on it."

"Then how do we get out of here?" Jack asked.

"There's only one way out of this hallway," Ian said. "But there's a guard stationed next to the door."

"Taylor will have to do her mind thing on him," Ostin said. "Then where do we go?"

"We go left, then walk straight out through the front lobby."

"What's outside?"

"Soldiers. Lots and lots of soldiers."

"Any vehicles nearby?"

Ian looked around. "A truck, two cars, a motorcycle, and a transport van."

"Are there keys in any of them?"

He concentrated on it. "Not that I can see."

"I can hot-wire it," Jack said. "It will only take me a few minutes."

"Then what are we facing?" Ostin asked.

"There's a single gateway that goes through all three fences. The checkpoint has three guards with machine guns, two more inside the booth, and a tank on the outside."

"So we can't run it," Ostin said. "We'll just have to convince them that we're transporting the terrorists to safety."

McKenna touched Ostin's arm. "What do you want me to do? Besides light fires."

"Keep safe," Ostin said.

"I'll do my best," she said.

Just then Ian said, "They're coming."

"How many soldiers?" Ostin asked.

"Two. One on each side."

"Where's Taylor?"

"She's in front."

Ostin looked at Zeus. "Ready?"

Electricity sparked between his fingers. "Born ready," he said.

Jack and Wade pressed themselves up against the wall near the door.

"Ian, give us a countdown," Ostin said.

"Thirty feet," Ian said. "Twenty-five, twenty, fifteen . . ." His voice softened to a whisper. "Ten, five . . ." They could hear the sound of the key in the door. Jack glanced at Zeus, who nodded. The door opened and the two soldiers pushed Taylor in.

Taylor saw her friends before the soldiers did. She looked at them, dumbfounded, trying to figure out why they were in her cell. Then one of the soldiers looked at Zeus.

"Surprise!" Zeus shouted, blasting both of them and knocking one of them out the door.

"Too much!" Jack said. "Take this one, Wade!"

Wade jumped on the first soldier while Jack reached out into the hall, grabbed the other soldier by his feet, and dragged him back into the cell.

"Sorry, man," Zeus said. "Got the rush on."

"I feel you," Jack said. "I bet that felt good."

"Not for them," McKenna said.

Ostin pushed the door shut. "Ian, are we safe?"

"I don't think anyone saw us."

"Taylor, come here," Ostin said, leading her by the arm to the bed.

Taylor still looked confused. "How'd everyone get in here?"

"I let them in," Ostin said. He attached his RESAT to hers. "Let's get this thing off."

"You can't take it off," Taylor said, pulling away from him. "It goes off if you mess with it."

"It's okay," McKenna said. "He solved it."

Taylor looked at McKenna. "Then why is yours still on?"

“It’s to fool them,” Ostin said. “I disabled it. But they don’t know it. These dudes don’t even know how they work.”

“Then get it off me,” Taylor said.

It took Ostin less than thirty seconds to release her RESAT. When it was off, she fell back on the bed. “Thank you.”

“Now I need to rewire it.”

Zeus and Abigail tied up the soldiers as Jack and Wade finished putting on their uniforms.

“What’s the plan?” Taylor asked.

“We’re going out the front door. We need you to do your mind trick thing with the guards there.”

“Why would they let us out?”

“We’re setting the place on fire and starting a riot. In all the confusion, we’ll look like we’re trying to get you out to safety.”

“How do I look?” Jack asked Abigail.

“Like one of them,” she said. “Except taller. And better looking.”

Jack smiled.

“How about me?” Wade asked.

“You look like one of them,” Abigail said.

“Guys, we’ve got a problem,” Ian said. “There’s a soldier headed to Zeus’s room.”

“Is anyone else with him?” Zeus asked.

“No, he’s alone. I don’t see anyone watching either.”

Zeus walked to the door. “Then I’ll take him out.” He opened the door and stuck his head out. “Hey, amigo!”

The man turned toward him.

Zeus reached out his hand. “Got a present for you.” He shot a single bolt nearly thirty feet, bouncing the man off the wall and to the ground. Zeus stepped back in. “He’s down.”

“Time to go,” Ostin said, setting aside Taylor’s RESAT.

“Wait, what about my RESAT?” Taylor asked.

“Here, take mine,” Ostin said. “It can shock people.”

She put her arms through its straps. “Thanks.”

“What does it look like out there?” Ostin asked Ian.

“Surprisingly quiet. It’s like everyone’s having a siesta break.”

“Which cell has the prisoners?”

He pointed to his left. "Right there, the cell next to us, left side of the hall."

"Zeus, you better come with us," Ostin said. "In case the convicts come at us like those others did."

"You got it."

"I'll be your prisoner too," McKenna said.

"I'll take Abi," Jack said.

Abigail nodded.

"And me," Taylor said.

"No problem," Jack said. "I can handle both of you."

"Not hardly," Taylor said.

"Looks like it's you and me, buddy," Ian said to Wade.

"All right," Ostin said. "Prisoners in front, guards in back. Put your hands behind your backs so you look handcuffed. No one leaves the room until Zeus and I have let the prisoners out." He turned to Zeus. "Ready?"

"Let's do this."

They walked out to the cell next to theirs, and Ostin unlocked the door. Zeus kicked it open. There were at least twenty prisoners crammed into the room. "*Estamos escapando!*" Ostin shouted. "*Salganse ahorita! Huyan!*"

The prisoners just stared at Ostin, confused at seeing an American in a Peruvian soldier uniform telling them to escape.

"Come on!" Ostin shouted. "*Motín!*"

They still just stood there.

"We haven't time for this," Zeus said. "Stay in your cage, you rats."

"No, start the fires," Ostin said. "That's the plan."

"Right," Zeus said. He blasted the mattress with both hands. It burst into flames. The convicts jumped back, then, looking at Zeus in horror, fled the room. Ostin, Zeus, and Taylor ran back to Taylor's cell. "Come on!" Zeus shouted.

"McKenna," Ostin said. "Light the mattresses on fire!"

"Love to." Her hand burst into flames, and she lit the mattress. Then she and Zeus went to each of the cells, lighting the mattresses until smoke poured out of the cells and filled the hallway. An alarm went off.

Ostin opened the cell door for the other prisoners, who didn't need any persuading to get out, though they stayed away from Zeus.

"Everyone take their positions!" Ostin shouted. "Taylor, we need them to let us out now."

They walked to the door at the end of the corridor. "*Abran la puerta!*" Ostin shouted.

Taylor concentrated. Immediately the door opened. Soldiers rushed into the building with guns and fire extinguishers.

"Ian, which way?" Ostin shouted.

"Follow me."

When they got to the outside door, one of the soldiers pointed a gun at them. "*Alto!*"

The man suddenly collapsed to the ground.

A soldier standing behind the fallen man said, "Amigos, this way!"

"Who are you?" Ostin asked.

"*Apúrate!*" the man said, grabbing Ostin's arm. "We haven't much time."

"Are you with Jaime?" Taylor asked.

The man looked confused. "Jaime?"

"The voice," Taylor said.

He hesitated a moment, then said, "The voice. *Sí.*"

Another alarm went off, and outside the fences the soldiers were emerging from their tents. "Please. Hurry."

They followed the man over to an idling prisoner transport van. He opened the back doors. "Everyone in, hurry."

Suddenly there was a huge explosion about a hundred yards west of the camp. Men started shouting and two sirens went off.

"Get in!" the man shouted.

When everyone was inside, the man shut the doors behind them, then ran around to the passenger's side and climbed in. He shouted to the driver, "*Vámonos!*"

The van pulled forward, needling through the growing crowd of soldiers who had come to fight the fire. They drove up to the first check station, where they were stopped by a guard with a machine gun. He spoke to the driver. "*A dónde vas?*"

"*Estamos sacandoles del incendio. Orden del general.*"

The soldier looked at the teens in the van. "*No puedo dejarte ir.*"

The man in the passenger seat fired something, and the soldier dropped to the ground. Then the man pushed a button on a hand remote, and there was another explosion—this one closer to the jail—taking out a hundred-foot section of the fence.

"*Vamos!*" he shouted to the driver.

"Distraction," Ostin said. "Clever."

The van drove quickly in the opposite direction of hundreds of soldiers who were running toward the jail. Within just a few minutes they had passed out of the military compound.

"We did it," the man said through a speaker box. "We got away."

Everyone in back clapped, except Ostin, who looked conflicted. Jack punched him in the shoulder. "Lighten up, dude. You and that awesome brain of yours broke us out of there."

Wade also punched Ostin in the shoulder. "Yeah, you're the brain man."

Ostin still didn't look happy. "I didn't get us out of there; those guys did." He turned to Taylor and frowned. "Why didn't he know Jaime?"

Taylor shrugged. "Maybe they don't use their real names."

Ostin frowned. "Something doesn't feel right. Can you read their minds?"

Taylor looked over at the driver, who was divided from the back by a thick, bulletproof Plexiglas sheet braced with a metal caging. "I don't know. I'll try." She put her hand against the metal siding of the van.

Ostin knocked on the plastic partition between them. The man turned back. "Yes?"

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace safe, amigos," he said. "Someplace very safe." He turned back toward the front.

Taylor looked at Ostin with wide eyes. "We've got to get out of here," she whispered.

"Why?" Ostin asked.

"They're taking us to the Elgen."



The mood in back of the van changed from relief to terror.

“What do we do?” Abigail asked.

“Try the back door,” Jack said.

“There’s no handle,” Taylor said. “You can only open the door from the outside.”

“Can you shock them?” Ostin asked Zeus.

“Not through that plastic screen.”

“What if I melted through it first?” McKenna said.

“If you shock them, they’ll crash,” Taylor said.

“I’d rather take my chance with a car crash than with Hatch,” Zeus said. “At least with the crash I’ve got a chance of surviving.”

Taylor looked back at the men, then knocked on the plastic behind the first man. “Where are you really taking us?”

“I told you. Somewhere safe.”

“Where is safe?”

“You know all you need to know,” he replied.

“Who are you really?” Ostin asked again.

At first neither of them answered. Then the driver laughed. “Soldiers of fortune.”

“No,” said the other. “Underpaid soldiers.”

“Not anymore,” the driver said. “Soon we will be sunning on the beaches in Argentina.”

“You’re Elgen scum!” Jack shouted.

“No.” The man in the passenger seat turned back. “We are not with the Elgen company. But they pay better than the Peruvian army.”

“You know they’ll kill us,” Taylor said.

“What they do is not our concern,” the driver said. “And the Peruvian government will execute you anyway. Your chances are better with the Elgen company.”

“You’ve never met Hatch,” Zeus said.

“Met what?” the man replied.

“Manuel,” the driver said, his voice suddenly pitched. “*Mire!*”

In the middle of the road ahead of them was an army tank. Its cannon was pointed directly at them.

“That’s not good,” Ostin said.

“Who is that?” Taylor asked.

“Looks like the Peruvian army isn’t as dumb as those two think they are.”

“*Que hago?*” the driver asked.

“*No sé! Vire!*”

“*Pueden reducirnos a cenizas!*”

“*No van a matar los chicos.*”

“What are they saying?” Taylor asked.

“They’re trying to figure out what to do about the tank,” Ostin said.

Suddenly machine-gun fire exploded around them, blowing out the van’s tires.

“Everyone down!” Taylor shouted.

The teens fell to the floor. There was a loud screech as the tires shredded off and the truck’s metal rims hit the pavement.

“*Mi Madre de Dios!*” shouted the driver.

“*Firme!*”

The transport veered off the road and everyone bounced around in the back. Bullets tore through the front and side windows of the cab, ripping apart the front of the van. A stray bullet hit Jack in the arm. “Ah!”

“They got Jack!” Wade shouted. “They got Jack!”

“Calm down!” Jack shouted. “It’s just a flesh wound!”

The van tipped up on two wheels, then slid down a small dirt slope where it crashed into a grove of small trees, tumbling everyone in back. When the motion stopped, everyone was quiet.

“Everyone okay?” Jack asked.

“I’m okay,” Abigail said.

“Me too,” McKenna said. “I just hit my head.”

“I’m okay too,” Taylor said. She had a small gash on her forehead and blood was running down the side of her face.

“You’re bleeding,” Ostin said.

“I noticed,” she said, wiping the blood from around her eye.

Ostin moved closer to her. “It doesn’t look too deep.”

Zeus said to Jack, “You okay, buddy?”

“Yeah. Stings a little.”

“I can help,” Abigail said. She took Jack’s arm and the pain went away.

“Thanks,” Jack said.

“Anytime,” she replied.

As they lay there, dozens of Peruvian soldiers surrounded the vehicle. Soldiers pulled open the front door of the van, then dragged the bodies of the traitorous soldiers out of the cab.

“Están muertos.”

A soldier looked into the window at the youth, then stepped back. “Everyone come out of the truck,” a voice said.

“We’re locked in!” Ostin shouted. “We can’t get out.”

“Apúrense!” a voice shouted. *“Scales antes que reventa el combi!”*

The soldiers swarmed the back of the van. “We will open the door,” one shouted. “If you run, we shoot.”

“Should I blast them?” Zeus asked.

“No. There’s too many of them,” Taylor said.

“And they’ve got us outgunned,” Ostin added.

“Maybe they’re going to shoot us for trying to escape,” Wade said.

“They have a tank,” Ostin said. “If they wanted us dead, they would have just blown us up. Besides, they probably just think we were kidnapped by those dudes.”

The back doors of the van swung open, revealing dozens of guns pointing at them, including two mounted machine guns and a flamethrower.

“Can you say *overkill*?” Ostin said sardonically.

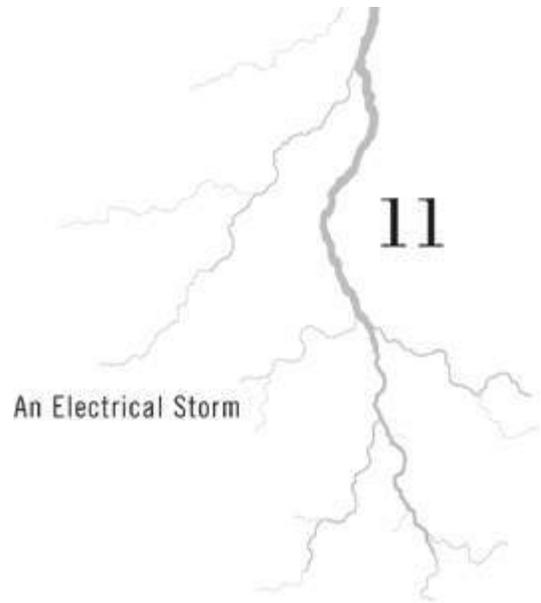
“Come out,” one of them shouted in English. “One at a time.”

Ostin breathed out slowly. “Failed again,” he said.

“Michael,” Taylor said, holding her head. “Where are you?”



PART 3



In the Tyrrhenian Sea. The ES *Ampere*.

“Are we in agreement?” Chairman Schema asked. Two hours earlier he had called the board together for an emergency meeting. An ominous, dark atmosphere permeated the boardroom.

Board member Eleven broke the silence. “I’m not comfortable playing judge and jury,” he said. “We’re voting to execute someone.”

“Perhaps you’d be more comfortable spending the rest of your life in prison,” Two replied.

“If they don’t hang you first,” Ten said.

“No,” Schema said, shaking his head. “There is no other option. Hatch must never leave this ship alive.” His gray eyes slowly panned the table. “We must be unanimous as a board. This is no time for dissension.”

“Then I’ll abstain from voting,” Eleven said.

“I will too,” Seven said.

“As will I,” Six said.

Schema looked at the three of them with disgust. “I didn’t realize the board had cowards on it.” Everyone turned away from the three

except Schema, who stared at them coldly. "So be it," he finally said. "Let the record show that board members Eleven, Six, and Seven are irrelevant."

"I make a motion that we vote," Two said.

"I second the motion," said Ten.

"Is there any more discussion?" Schema asked. When there was no response, he said, "All in favor of the motion, say aye."

The room was a chorus of ayes.

"Any opposed?" He looked at Eleven, Six, and Seven, who remained silent. "The motion carries."

Schema's secretary walked into the room. She leaned over and whispered in the chairman's ear. Schema nodded. "Have we confirmed who's on board?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. "Just the pilot and Dr. Hatch."

"Alert security to their arrival," Schema said. "Land them." As she turned he looked over the board. "We've reached our decision just in time. I've just been informed that Dr. Hatch's transport is landing on the ship."

* * *

The Elgen helicopter dropped quickly beneath a low-hanging canopy of black-gray clouds, hovering a moment before settling onto the ship's pitching helipad. Hatch almost threw up. White-knuckle landings on a rocking deck were just another on a long list of reasons for Hatch to dislike their corporate sea base.

"We've landed," the pilot said.

Hatch nodded. "So we have."

The pilot shut off the engine, and as the rotors slowed, two armed guards, one tall and lanky, the other short and muscular, approached the helicopter. Dr. Hatch opened the helicopter door and stepped out, looking at the guards with a wry smile. "Now why would you be holding guns?"

"Sir, please step away from the craft," the tall guard said.

"I asked you a question," Hatch said sternly.

"Please step away from the craft," the guard repeated.

Hatch looked back and forth between them, then said, "As you wish."

The muscular guard walked around Hatch and looked inside the helicopter.

"Visual inspection clear, sir," he barked to the other guard.

"Were you expecting someone?" Hatch asked.

"We need to check you for weapons, sir," the first guard said. "Please put your hands above your head."

Hatch shook his head with annoyance. "Is this really necessary?"

"Yes, sir."

Hatch complied with the command and the muscular guard patted him down, then stood back at attention. "He's clean."

"Does Chairman Schema know you're treating me this way?"

"These are the chairman's orders, sir," the guard replied.

Hatch nodded. "How unfortunate."

"Follow me, please," the tall guard said. Hatch followed the guard, while the other guard walked behind him, his gun drawn.

Schema's secretary buzzed the chairman as Hatch and the guards entered the waiting room. "They're here, sir." She nodded to the tall guard, who opened the boardroom door. Hatch stepped past him and into the room. He noticed two more guards inside the room. The board was silent on his entrance.

"I see there have been some changes since my last visit," Hatch said, sitting down. "Thank you for sending the welcoming committee."

Chairman Schema, who was seated at the far side of the table, just glared at him, his anger barely contained beneath a veneer of forced civility, like the clattering lid on a boiling pot.

Hatch coolly returned his gaze. "You wish to say something?"

"Dr. Hatch, you were given specific instructions and deadlines to dismantle the biogenesis program. Instead, you flagrantly disobeyed our orders, leading to the destruction of our largest facility, leaving seventy percent of an entire country out of power, and doing irreparable damage to our reputation."

Hatch showed no emotion. "We were attacked by terrorists. How is this my fault?"

“You were attacked because you failed to obey our order to release the Vey woman!” Schema shouted. “Your refusal to do so resulted in the attack.”

“That’s not wholly accurate. The group attacked us for their own political agenda.”

“Political agenda.” Three laughed. “They’re teenagers. Their only *political agenda* is free Internet.”

Hatch looked at Three, his eyes dark and fierce. “As I said, they have a political agenda.”

Schema continued, “The damage done by your impudence has set us back years, if not outright destroyed our chance for short-term success.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Hatch replied. “Do you really believe that any country will walk away from free electricity? Our plant being shut down was not our fault—but the poor handling of the situation is completely *yours*. We were attacked by a sophisticated and powerful group of anarchists and terrorists. When they attacked our plant, world sympathy should have been with us, not against us. But instead of invoking public sympathy, you apologized. What was going through your mind? What you did was tantamount to Roosevelt apologizing to the world after Pearl Harbor. Your stupidity turned public sentiment against us.” Hatch looked around the table at the board members. “Really, this is our leader? Our chairman? This is the man we trust with our future?” He turned and faced Schema. “You have done enough damage!”

Schema pounded the table with his fist. “Enough!”

“Indeed it is,” Hatch said, glaring at him. “You are no longer fit to run this organization.”

Schema jumped up from his chair. “How dare you!”

Hatch also jumped up, simultaneously slamming his fist down on the table. “How dare you! You have led this group from one disastrous decision to the next. Your shortsightedness is exceeded only by your stupidity.”

Schema was red in the face, his veins bulging from his temples. “Guards, take him to the brig.”

“I’m not done,” Hatch said, pointing at Schema. “It’s time the Elgen became who we were meant to become. It’s time for a change, but not the one you brought me here for.” Hatch’s eyes panned the room as his voice softened. “Yes, I know why you brought me here. You can’t fire me. I know too much. I hold each of your lives in my hands. You didn’t bring me here to fire me—you brought me here to silence me.”

No one spoke.

“Don’t worry. It’s not going to happen. If anyone will be silenced, it will be our illustrious chair.”

“Guards, take him out of here!” Schema shouted. “Now.”

The two guards walked up behind Hatch.

“Sir, put your hands behind your back,” one of them said.

“So it begins,” Hatch said. He looked around the room with a confident, dark smile. “Does anyone here, besides me, of course, object to the chairman’s scheme to put me down?” He looked back and forth between the group. “Answer carefully, your decision will hold consequences.”

“Even in complete failure you’re defiant,” Two said.

Hatch looked at her. “You’ve always shared the chairman’s animosity for me. It makes me wonder what else you share.”

The woman blanched. “How dare you!”

“How dare I? You have no idea how much I’m willing to dare.”

“You’re a fool,” Two said. “We are fortunate to be rid of you.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Hatch said. “The day is not over yet.”

Two chuckled. “Are you so obtuse or arrogant as to think that this board will change their minds?”

“The day will reveal who is truly obtuse,” Hatch said. “And no, I don’t believe that you will change your mind, but the less *obtuse* board members will. And my *arrogance* is not unfounded. Mark my word, friends: Those who don’t support me will live to regret their decision. Sooner than you imagine.”

Seven stood up. “Mr. Chairman, is this treatment of Dr. Hatch really necessary?”

“I agree,” Six added. “Dr. Hatch has provided much to our organization. There wouldn’t even be a Starxource initiative if it

wasn't for him."

Schema looked around the room. "Anyone else disagree with my actions?" he asked softly. "Would you like to resurrect the discussion on Dr. Hatch's reprimand?"

Eleven also raised her hand.

"Seven, Six, and Eleven," Schema said, looking at the three in disdain. "You are relieved of your board membership and are under house arrest until we decide your fate. Captain, see that there is a guard stationed at each of their rooms."

"Yes, sir," the guard barked back.

Schema looked around at the rest of the table. "Is there anyone else who wishes to join them?"

No one spoke.

"Take these fools away," Schema said.

* * *

As Hatch and his two guards boarded the elevators near the center of the boat, Hatch said to his escorts, "I'll give you one more chance to prove your loyalty to me." He paused for emphasis. "Not for my sake, but yours."

"Shut up!" the first guard shouted. "You're insane."

Hatch smiled. "So be it."

The elevator doors opened onto the bottom level of the ship, and Hatch was marched down a long corridor to the brig. The *Ampere's* brig consisted of four cells, six foot by six foot, with padded walls and electric locks. Being on the ship's bottom level, the brig was situated less than seventy feet from the engine room, so the cells and the outside corridor were always noisy, reverberating with the sound of the yacht's massive diesel engines.

The second guard opened the first cell door and stood to its side. "Welcome to your new home. Get comfortable. You're going to be here a long, long time."

"I don't think so," Hatch said. He turned to the first guard, who was still clutching Hatch's arm. "Are you going to take my cuffs off?"

The guard shoved him into the small cell. "Maybe tomorrow," he said. "But probably not."

"You don't have tomorrow," Hatch said.

"He's a nutcase," the second guard said. He slammed the door, which locked with a loud buzz and electric click. Both guards turned to go.

"One more thing . . .," Hatch said after them.

Both guards turned back.

"Let me tell you something that many have learned the hard way." He leaned toward the bars and his voice fell to a low, guttural growl. "I never ever, ever forget."

"Like an elephant," the first guard said, laughing.

"Come on," the second guard said. "Just leave the nutjob in his cage."

Suddenly the corridor lights flickered. Then the lights at the end of the hall went dark.

"Gentlemen," Hatch said. "I believe there's an electrical storm coming."

Both guards drew their weapons, the first a submachine gun, the second a Colt sidearm. Suddenly the second guard dropped his handgun and began screaming. His face was red and he was violently shaking his hands in the air. "My hands! They're burning!"

Then the first guard also threw his gun to the floor and fell to his knees, pulling off his boots. "My feet!"

The two guns suddenly lifted into the air and flew to the end of the hall. Torstyn, Quentin, and Kylee emerged from the darkness, walking toward the brig. They casually walked past the two guards, who were on the ground writhing and screaming with pain. Kylee pulled the electric keys from the second guard's pocket without even bending over and unlocked the door.

"What took you so long?" Hatch asked.



“Get up,” Quentin shouted at the guards, “before Torstyn explodes your brains! Then strip to your underwear and get into the cell.”

The second guard stood. With blistered hands he quickly tore off his clothes. “Whatever you say, sir.”

The first guard pulled off his boots, then just lay there. He looked like he was in shock.

Quentin looked down at him. “You have a problem with my order?”

“No, sir. I can’t . . .” He grimaced. “My feet . . .”

Quentin looked at the man’s feet. They were bright crimson and severely blistered.

“Then crawl in,” Torstyn said. “Or should I just melt you here?”

“No, sir,” the guard said. He hurriedly pulled down his slacks, screaming as they brushed against his feet. Then he crawled into the cell, whimpering.

“Both of you on your knees with your hands on the back wall,” Hatch said. “And don’t waste my time.”

When both guards were against the wall, Hatch shut the cell door behind them.

“Just a few minutes ago you both were laughing,” Hatch said. “What happened? Did you lose your sense of humor?”

Neither guard answered.

“I asked you a question.”

“No, sir!” they shouted in unison.

Hatch turned to the second guard. “What did you call me? A nutjob?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the second guard said.

Hatch turned from the cell. “Not as sorry as you will be. Come on,” he said to his youths. “Let’s go pay a visit to the board.”

The four of them walked down the hallway, back toward the elevator.

Hatch picked up the guard’s pistol, put it in his right pocket, then pulled the satellite phone from his left pocket.

He pushed a button and just seconds later a voice answered. “Engage,” Hatch said, then he stowed the phone back in his pocket. He turned to Quentin. “Where are Bryan and Tara?”

“They’re covering the main floor,” Quentin said. “I’ll let them know we’re on our way.”

“No, have them meet us here,” Hatch said.

“Yes, sir,” Quentin said. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. “Tara, it’s Q. Come down to the first floor. Use the forward elevator.” He returned his phone to his pocket and turned back to Hatch. “They’ll be right here.”

Less than a minute later the elevator stopped on the floor. Tara and Bryan stepped out.

“What’s going on up there?” Hatch asked.

“Everything’s calm. I think the board members are still meeting.”

“Does anyone know you’re on board?”

“Two window washers spotted us,” Tara said.

“And?” Hatch asked.

“They jumped overboard.” Bryan laughed. “Tara made them think the boat was filled with cobras.” He turned to Quentin. “One of them did the most awesome belly flop. It was epic.”

Hatch didn’t look amused. “Did anyone see them go over?”

“We don’t think so,” Tara said. “We didn’t see anyone else. And we could barely hear them screaming.”

“All right, listen up. The three board members loyal to me are under house arrest on the second floor. We’re going to free them, then pay the board a visit. There are currently fourteen guards on board. Four of them—Woodbury, Spafford, Harlan, and Mull—are loyal to me and are awaiting my orders. We’ve locked two in the brig, and the other eight will need to be neutralized. A helicopter with twenty of our best soldiers is on its way from the *Faraday*. It will touch down in exactly twenty-eight minutes. Quentin, I need you and Tara to make sure they encounter no resistance on landing, understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Quentin said.

Tara nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Kylee, Bryan, and Torstyn are with me. We’ll take out the three guards on the suite level, then meet up with our four guards on deck.” He turned to Tara. “Did you see any guards on the bridge?”

“Two.”

Hatch looked Tara in the eyes. “Dispose of them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Quentin, take out all communications. I don’t want an SOS going out to any other ships in the fleet. Not all of them are loyal to me yet.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll take out the bridge before we get there.”

“Don’t take out any of the controls or radar. We still need to float this tub.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Also, take out the video console. I don’t want them seeing us on the second floor. I’ll give you five minutes. Call me after it’s down.”

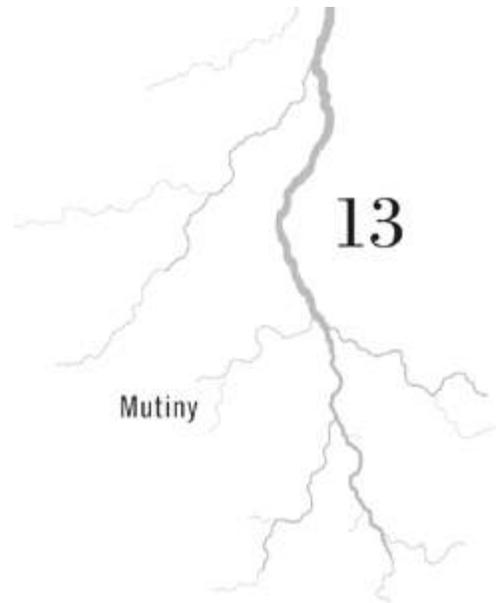
“Yes, sir.”

“Go.”

Tara and Quentin stepped into the elevator. It was less than five minutes later that Hatch’s phone rang.

“We have the bridge, sir. The consoles are down.”

“Good. Stay there until I arrive.” He turned back to Torstyn and Bryan. “Let’s end this.”



Inside the boardroom, Schema looked somberly over the group.

“Then it’s unanimous,” he said. “Once we reach open sea, Dr. Hatch will be exterminated.” He burst out in a fit of coughing, then breathed out slowly. “It will be a relief to be free of him.”

Two Elgen guards, Spafford and Mull, stood watch outside the boardroom door with their guns drawn.

There was a loud beep on Spafford’s communicator. He turned to Mull. “It’s time.”

Mull nodded. He glanced once more down the hallway and then, together, they opened the boardroom doors and walked in, closing the doors behind them.

“Gentlemen,” Schema said. “You’ll have to leave. This meeting is still closed.”

The guards leveled their guns at the board members. “You are all under arrest. Put your hands on top of your heads. Now!”

“What are you doing?” Schema asked.

Two secretly pushed a button under the table.

“I said, now!” Spafford repeated.

“I suggest *you* drop your weapons,” Two said to the guards. “I’ve alerted the guards.”

“Shut up!” Mull shouted. “And get on your knees and prepare to meet the admiral of the Elgen fleet.”

“The admiral?” Two said.

“Admiral Hatch,” Spafford said.

“Have you gone raving mad?” Schema said.

Then the door opened and Hatch walked into the room. He was flanked by Quentin and Torstyn and followed by the three disposed board members.

“Guards, subdue him!” Schema shouted, pointing at Hatch.

Hatch just shook his head. “Clueless as always,” he said. “They don’t take orders from you.” He turned to Spafford and Mull. “Well done, men.”

“Your little coup won’t work,” Two said. “I’ve alerted the guards. It’s just a matter of time before you’re back in the brig.”

Hatch looked at her for a moment, then said softly, “You’ve alerted what guards?”

Just then the boardroom door burst open and a dozen guards in black uniforms ran into the room. They were led by a squad captain dressed in purple.

“*Those* guards,” Two said. She turned to the captain. “Thank goodness you’re here. Dr. Hatch has gone rogue. Arrest him.”

The captain just looked at her, his eyes narrowing in contempt.

“I gave you an order!” she shouted.

“These aren’t ours,” Schema said to Two in a low voice.

“You’re correct, Schema,” Hatch said, looking more amused than angry. “Which, honestly, I find refreshing, as it’s so rare that you’re right about anything these days. But, I suppose, even a broken clock is right twice a day.”

“What are you up to, Hatch?” Schema said.

“I’m relieving you of your command,” Hatch replied. He turned to the captain. “Secure them.”

“Yes, sir.” The captain turned back toward the board table and shouted, “Everyone stand with their hands behind their backs. Now!”

None of the board obeyed, but looked to Schema for direction. Schema stared at Hatch defiantly.

“You were given an order,” Hatch said.

No one moved.

“No?” Hatch said. “Okay, then. Captain Welch, shoot one of them.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard said. “Which one?”

“It’s your choice.”

He turned his gun on Three.

“Wait!” Schema said, holding up his hand. “You don’t have to do that. We’ll do what you say.”

“Indeed you will,” Hatch said. He turned to the captain. “Next time someone hesitates to follow an order, *shoot them.*”

“Yes, sir.”

Hatch looked at the board. “Leadership is such a burden. You know how it is, Schema. If you threaten to cut off someone’s finger for breaking a rule, you’re going to have to cut off a few fingers before everyone figures out that you mean what you say. So which one of you is going to be our demonstration? It’s your decision. Here’s your first opportunity to show us. Everyone stand up.”

Everyone quickly stood.

“Now sit down.”

They sat down.

“Stand up!”

They stood up.

“Now . . . stand down.”

Half of the board sat down, the other half wavered, confused, crouched somewhere in the middle. Everyone looked at Hatch nervously.

“What do you want us to do?” Four said.

Hatch grinned. “I’m just toying with you,” he said. “Sit down.”

Everyone sat.

“What’s your point, Hatch?” Schema said.

Hatch’s grin turned to a scowl. “My point is I’ve listened to you fools for too long. From now until the end of your miserable lives, you will do precisely what I say. Everyone stand.”

They all stood.

“Secure them,” Hatch said to the captain.

“You heard him,” the captain barked. “Everyone put your hands behind your backs. Do it now!”

Everyone obeyed. Two of the soldiers walked around the room zip tying the board members’ hands together. Suddenly, Ten spun around, attempting to grab the soldier’s gun. One of the guards fired an electrode from across the room, dropping Ten to the ground.

“Secure him,” the captain ordered.

Two soldiers grabbed Ten, tied his arms behind his back, tied his feet together, then dragged him away from the table, laying him at Hatch’s feet.

“What are your orders, sir?” the captain asked.

Hatch crouched down next to Ten. “Were my orders too complex for you?”

“You’re not going to get away with this,” Ten said.

“Of course I will,” Hatch said. “Throw him out.”

Schema said, “You don’t need to do that, Hatch. He’s sorry. Aren’t you, Ten?”

“I’m most certain of that,” Hatch said. He turned to the captain. “Open a window for me.” He pointed to the middle panel of the external glass wall. “That will do.”

The captain pointed his submachine gun at the tempered glass and pulled the trigger, ripping out a large section. The smell of gunpowder filled the room.

“There’s your exit,” Hatch said to Ten. “I hope you’re a good swimmer.”

Ten was trembling. “I’m sorry. I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Will you?” Hatch asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I want you to drown.”

Two soldiers dragged Ten over to the hole in the glass, then turned back to Hatch. Hatch nodded. The guards lifted the man and threw him out. The sound of his screaming could be heard until a distant splash ended it.

“Good-bye, Ten,” Hatch said. He turned to the captain. “Think he can swim with his hands tied behind his back?”

The captain shook his head. "No, Admiral."

"I don't think so either," Hatch said. He looked over the rest of the board members. "As I was telling you, you always have to cut off a few fingers before they get the point. Anyone else care to test my resolve?"

The board members just stared at him fearfully.

"Maybe you do learn. Take over, Captain."

"You will comply with our every word," the captain said. "All of you come to this side of the room and kneel."

Everyone except for Schema hurried to the starboard side of the room, next to the glass. The captain walked up to Schema and pulled him out of his chair, forcing him to kneel, then kicked him in the stomach. Schema gasped, then fell to his side, coughing fiercely.

Hatch turned back to the three displaced board members, Six, Seven, and Eleven. "Take your rightful places," he said.

The three expelled board members hurried back to the table. Hatch looked at the other board members. "Funny how things change. Just an hour ago you pitied these three. Now you would give anything to be one of them, wouldn't you? I told you there would be consequences." He turned and looked at Schema, then slowly walked up to him. "Living in Peru, I couldn't help but learn a little about the Incan culture. They were far more advanced than most people realize. They created architectural feats that stump our modern architects. They created massive pyramids that we cannot duplicate. They performed successful brain surgery.

"True, they had their brutal side and practiced human sacrifice, but here, too, they showed their keen intellect and understanding of the nature of politics. Whenever an Incan king conquered another kingdom, the fallen king was sacrificed in front of his subjects so there would be no mistaking who was in charge."

Schema turned pale. Hatch crouched down in front of him. "You didn't really think I was foolish enough to come back here unprepared?" Hatch rose and faced the kneeling board members. "Just another example of your chairman's remarkable shortsightedness." He turned back to Schema. "You are relieved of your chairmanship. Be grateful I haven't relieved you of your life."

"You'll pay for this, Hatch. This is mutiny."

“*Admiral* Hatch,” Hatch said calmly. “Of course it’s mutiny. And pay? Where exactly would I send the check? To whom? If you’re implying that this scenario might somehow end differently than me in charge and you in prison, you can disabuse yourself of that notion. There is no cavalry. Everyone answers to me. That’s the inherent problem with delegation, Schema. Somewhere along the line the power gets . . . short-circuited.” Hatch turned to the captain. “Captain, lock them all in the same cell in the brig. Cell One.”

“Yes, Admiral.” He spun around. “All of you on your feet. Now!”

The members of the board all struggled to their feet.

“What are you going to do to us?” Two asked.

“You will be given a trial. But don’t worry. I will be just as merciful as you planned on being to me.” He turned around. “Captain of the guard, I want *former* chairman Schema hung upside down by his feet. I want the last of his loyal subjects to know that he’s been conquered.”

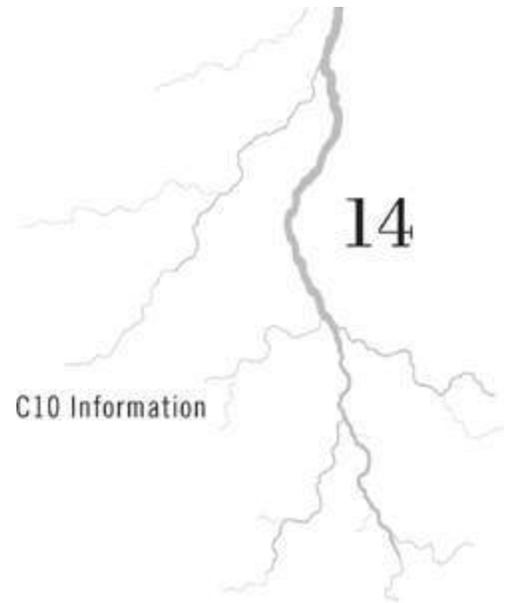
“Yes, sir.”

Schema turned white. “Don’t do this. You need me.”

“I need you like I need a kidney stone,” Hatch replied. “Take him out.”

Two soldiers lifted Schema to his feet and carried him out. Six other guards walked the rest of the board members out.

As they exited Quentin started to laugh, followed by the rest of the teens. Hatch smiled. “That was more amusing than I thought it would be. I’m almost sorry it’s over.”



After the board members had been removed, Hatch walked to the head of the conference room table. He pulled out Schema's former seat, pausing before sitting. "You have no idea how long I've waited for this. Please allow me the pleasure of savoring this moment." Hatch took a deep breath, then slowly sat in the chair. A dark smile crossed his face. "It's about time."

Seven began clapping, and she was quickly joined by the others still in the room.

"Thank you," Hatch said. "You may sit. Quentin and Torstyn, let me have you up here next to me. Quentin at my right, Torstyn at my left."

Everyone sat, the former board members in their assigned seats, the teens taking the empty seats closest to Hatch.

Hatch stood and walked up to the cabinet against the port wall and opened it, exposing a whiteboard. "The information I am about to share is C10."

The teens' expressions turned more somber.

"Is that understood?"

"Yes, Admiral," the teens replied.

“Call me sentimental, but you, my electric eagles, may still call me ‘sir.’”

“Yes, sir.”

The board members looked at one another. Eleven raised his hand.

“Yes?” Hatch said.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Admiral. But what is C10?”

“Explain C10, Quentin.”

“Yes, sir. C10 is the highest level of Elgen confidentiality. It means that what we are about to be told may not be repeated outside of Admiral Hatch’s presence, even with one another. The penalty for divulging C10 information is death by torture.”

“Is that clear enough?” Hatch asked.

“Yes,” Eleven said. “Thank you.”

“Let me see the Elgen salute,” Hatch said.

The youth raised their left hands to their temples. The other board members watched, then imitated.

“Very well. What I’m about to share with you is called Operation Luau.” Hatch wrote the words on the whiteboard: OPERATION LUAU.

He turned back around and tossed the pen on the table. “We need a land base. We need a place to carry out our experiments and build larger EMP weapons—a base far away from prying eyes, and invisible to the CIA, KGB, MI5, Mossad, or even any local government. A place with political autonomy. I have found just the place in the South Pacific, midway between Hawaii and Australia, near the islands of Samoa and Fiji—the Polynesian island nation of Tuvalu.”

“Tuvalu?” Bryan said.

“If you’ve never heard of Tuvalu, don’t worry, neither has anyone else—which is precisely why it is of interest to us. It is the world’s fourth smallest country, behind Vatican City, Nauru, and Monaco, and consists of three reef islands and six atolls.

“Unfortunately for them, the islanders declared independence from Britain in the 1970s. This was highly unwise, as they are little more than an island of hula dancers and fish spearers. They have no military, spend no money on defense, and have no means of defending themselves outside of a puny, impotent police force. Their navy consists of a single Pacific-class patrol boat provided by the Australian

government for maritime surveillance and fishery patrol. Even the *Tesla* could blow it out of the water.

“Tuvalu is facing an energy crisis. Rising ocean levels have damaged two of their diesel-motor power plants. Unfortunately for them, their third stopped working two months ago.”

“Fate has been kind,” Six said.

Hatch looked at her. “Fate is an excuse for people who are too stupid or too weak to make their own future,” he said. “We sabotaged the plant. Then three weeks later we engaged our Starxource plant, operating on Funafuti atoll, in Vaiaku, the capital of the island nation. We are now in complete control of the country’s energy.”

“In preparation of our arrival, we have, as we did in Peru, built a rehabilitation camp for the reeducation of the natives.”

“This is my plan: We will gather the Elgen fleet at the Peruvian Port of Callao, where we will load up with supplies and evacuate our troops from our Peruvian Starxource plant, leaving behind a squad of soldiers to guard what’s left of the plant. From there it will take us two weeks to reach Tuvalu.”

“How will we reach the island without them knowing?” Quentin asked.

Hatch put both hands on the table and leaned forward. “Oh, they know we’re coming. But we won’t encounter resistance. In fact, they plan to greet us with flowered leis and luaus. This is a diplomatic visit to celebrate the opening of our Starxource plant.”

“We have invited the Tuvalu prime minister, governor general, and entire parliament to a celebratory feast. I am assured by our local Elgen administration that they are most eager to demonstrate to us their gratitude.”

“As we feast, the *Faraday* will move into place outside the capital city. Our troops will disembark, while the *Watt* patrols the surrounding oceans. Any vessel trying to enter or leave the islands will be sunk.”

“When our troops are in position, power will be shut off throughout the island so there will be no communication on the island or to those outside of it. Only our facility will be powered. The government will be put under arrest and imprisoned while our troops

move in and capture the whole of their puny police force. They will be locked in their own jail with the men they have arrested, which should make for some entertaining moments.

“One of our advance groups will seize the country’s sole radio station, from which I will, the next morning, address the people and introduce them to their new state of affairs. Every citizen will be required to register with our internal police board. Those who resist will be locked into our prison and sent through our reeducation process.

“In the meantime, the *Ohm* and the *Volta*, with a contingent of two hundred guards, will dock on the island of Nanumanga, which will be cleared out of all inhabitants. This is where we will build our new laboratories and weapons-production facilities.” Hatch looked around the room. “Are there any questions?”

No one spoke.

“All right then. Quentin and Torstyn with me. The rest of you may retire for the evening. It’s been a long day. Get some rest. We have much to do over the next five weeks.”

While the rest of the youth and board retired to their rooms, Hatch, accompanied by two guards, led Quentin and Torstyn to the chairman’s suite. The guards opened the door, and once inside, Hatch picked up the room phone. “Send housekeeping to the admiral’s suite immediately.” Pause. “Yes, the chairman’s suite. Thank you.”

He set down the phone, then lifted a crystal decanter of Scotch, poured three glasses, then brought them over to the table on a silver platter. He offered the glasses to the teens, and they each took one. Quentin started to raise it to his lips, but Hatch stopped him.

“Just a moment, Quentin. Have I taught you nothing? Never imbibe before you know what you are about to imbibe. This pretentious little draught is the Balvenie Fifty, a rare fifty-year-old specimen of one of the finest single-malt Scotches ever distilled. A single bottle retails at more than thirty thousand dollars. So what I poured you there is a three-thousand-dollar taste. Therefore, it behooves us, out of decency and respect for the beverage, that we should thank former Chairman Schema for his fine taste in Scotch.” Hatch lifted his glass. “To Schema. A buffoon who knew his drink.”

They all raised their shots. Hatch closed his eyes as he drank, then set the glass down. "Worth every penny."

Quentin choked a little on the drink, which made Torstyn smile.

Hatch looked at the teens. "I invited you here to mark this occasion," he said. "A day which will live in infamy. Today marks the beginning of a new world order. The world is changing, my friends. The autonomy of nations is already slipping from their citizens' grasps and they don't even know it.

"It is self-evident that the supranational sovereignty of an intellectual elite is preferable to the archaic and outdated design of democracy. The belief that the average human, steeped in superstition and religious conditioning, has the ability to make rational decisions for society's governance is beyond ridiculous, it is unabashed stupidity.

"Today we have taken the conclusive step toward world government. I don't mean in the pantomime, impotent sense of a league of nations, rather an elite overclass prepared to rescue the dumb masses from themselves.

"You, my two apprentices, will someday take this gauntlet from me. You shall rule the world and the world will be better for it. So let us mark this momentous occasion with a toast." Hatch again filled their glasses. "To the Elgen elite."

"To the Elgen elite," they echoed.

All three downed their drinks.



Just minutes after the toast, there was a knock on the door. “Housekeeping.”

“Come in,” Hatch said.

The door slowly opened and a portly, middle-aged Italian woman in a white-and-turquoise housekeeping smock looked in timidly. “Chairman Schema?”

“Mr. Schema doesn’t live here anymore,” Hatch said. “I’m your new boss. Is it just you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Patrizia.”

“Okay, Patrizia, you’d better call for help. This room reeks of Schema. I want you to disinfect it—I want it scrubbed from top to bottom. I want you to change my linens, rugs, and towels—in short I want you to sterilize or replace every piece of fabric, including the drapes. You may begin by removing Mr. Schema’s personal belongings from the closets and drawers.”

The maid looked confused. “Where shall I take the chairman’s things?”

“He is no longer the chairman and you are not to refer to him by that title anymore. Do you understand?”

She swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

“I don’t care what you do with his personal artifacts.” He rubbed his chin, then said, “No, actually, I do. Throw them overboard. I don’t like clutter, and he won’t be needing them anymore.”

She looked around at the beautiful art. “Everything, sir?”

“Everything. Now call your colleagues and get to work. I want you done and out of my room in two hours. A minute longer and you’ll spend the night with the former chairman in the brig. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. Get to it.” Hatch turned back. He took another drink. “Quentin, I want you to make sure everyone’s accommodations are acceptable.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go to it. When you’re done, report to me on the forward deck.”

He stood. “Yes, sir.”

“Go along with him, Torstyn.”

“Yes, sir.”

The maid had already called the rest of the housekeeping crew and was working frantically, piling the linens in the center of the room. Hatch smiled to see her so motivated. He grabbed the bottle of Scotch and walked to the door. He turned back to the frantic woman. “One hour, fifty-eight minutes, Patrizia. I’ve set a timer. I will be back then. Hopefully, you won’t be escorted out by one of my guards.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, too frantic even to look at him.

Hatch walked out of the room.

* * *

Hatch took the elevator to the bridge level and walked out onto the deck, the pungent smell of sea spray filling his nostrils. He sat down near the bow, kicking his feet up on the chair next to him. He lifted the Scotch and took a swig, then set the bottle down next to the chair.

He had been there for about thirty minutes when Quentin walked out to him. "Everyone is happy with their room, sir."

"Where is Torstyn?"

"He's in his room."

"Very well," Hatch said. He was still looking out over the water. "Q?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever read the Bible?"

Quentin's brow furrowed. "No, sir. It wasn't allowed at the academy."

"That's a shame." He turned to Quentin. "It's fabulous fiction, really. Hogwash, of course, rubbish and drivel. But, every now and then, the writers got it right. Did you know that it prophesizes of us?"

"I didn't know that, sir."

"Two millennium ago they wrote of our day." Hatch looked back out over the water. "And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads a blasphemous name. Now the beast, which I saw, was like a leopard, his feet were like the feet of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion.

"The dragon gave the beast his power, his throne, and great authority. And all the world marveled and followed the beast.

"So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?' And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation.

"And all who dwell on the earth will worship him. . . ." He took another drink from the bottle, then turned back toward Quentin. "The seven heads and ten horns, the number seventeen, represents the seventeen electric children. And the dragon gave them their power, as I have given you yours. Just as I will give you thrones and great authority. And the people of this world shall fear you and they shall worship me." He smiled. "By the time they know who we are, it will be too late." He laughed. "I'm rather prosaic tonight, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, sir," Quentin said.

"Or maybe I'm just drunk."

Quentin looked down. “About the seventeen. What of the others?”

“The other Glows? They’ll come around,” he said. “Eventually. Even Michael Vey. If I have learned one thing from life, it is that you can’t fight destiny.”

Quentin bit down on his cheek. “Yes, sir. Do you need anything else, sir?”

“To be left alone,” Hatch said.

“Yes, sir. Requesting permission to retire to my room.”

“Get out of here,” Hatch said.

Quentin turned and went back inside. Hatch looked out over the setting sun. He held up his thumb, covering the halved red-orange orb. Then he lifted the bottle again. “To the dragon,” he said. “And his fearsome young beasts.”

* * *

It was after dark when Hatch carried what was left of the Scotch down to the brig. The engines were being serviced, so the bottom-level corridor was quiet for a change. The guards outside the cells saluted and stood at attention at Hatch’s approach. “Admiral, sir.”

“At ease, sailors,” Hatch said. He handed out his bottle. “Have a drink.”

“We’re on duty, sir,” they both said.

“Right answer,” he said. “Here,” he said to the closest guard, “hold my bottle.”

At Hatch’s appearance the crowded board members all stood, their hands still tied behind their backs—everyone except for Schema, who had been tied upside down by his feet to the outer bars, his back toward Hatch. He had been hanging for more than three hours and was unconscious. There was a pool of vomit on the floor beneath him.

Two pressed against the bars. “Cut him down, Hatch,” she said. “I demand it.”

Hatch looked at her incredulously. “Did I hear you right? You *demand* it?” His eyes narrowed on her. “Is that really what you said?”

Two swallowed, her look of indignation quickly evaporating.

Hatch smiled. "You, Numero Dos, are in no position to *demand* anything." He moved his face next to the bars. "And the next time you make such an imperious statement, you will join Ten bobbing for kelp in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Do you understand me?"

She began trembling. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, sir . . ."

"Yes, *Admiral*," Hatch corrected. He looked at the rest of the prisoners, who were cowed against the back wall of the cell. "If any of you get that wrong again, you will regret it for the rest of your greatly diminished life. From this moment on you will only address me as Admiral Hatch."

He started to turn.

"Admiral," Two said.

Hatch turned back. She knelt down and bowed her head until it touched the floor of the cell. "Please, Admiral. Please release the former chairman. He won't live much longer like this."

Hatch looked at her with intrigue. "So I wasn't wrong. You do care about him."

She looked up. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "Yes, Admiral."

"You have feelings for him?"

She swallowed. "Yes, Admiral."

"Do you love him?"

She hesitated, caught up by her emotion. "Yes, Admiral."

Hatch started to laugh. "Oh my." After a moment he said, "How much?"

"What?"

"How *much* do you love him?"

She looked at Hatch fearfully, certain that his question was a trap. "With all my heart."

"With all your heart." Hatch laughed. "I've seen your heart, lady, and there's not much there."

She didn't answer, but bowed her head.

Hatch exhaled. "Okay, you say you love him, I'll have him cut down." He flourished his hand. "For *love's* sake."

She looked up in surprise. "Thank you, Admiral. Thank you."

"As long as you agree to take his place."

Her expression turned from relief to horror.

"For *love's* sake," Hatch said. His eyes narrowed. "Or doesn't your *love* go that far?"

She hesitated a moment, then said, "Yes, Admiral. It does. Thank you for your kindness."

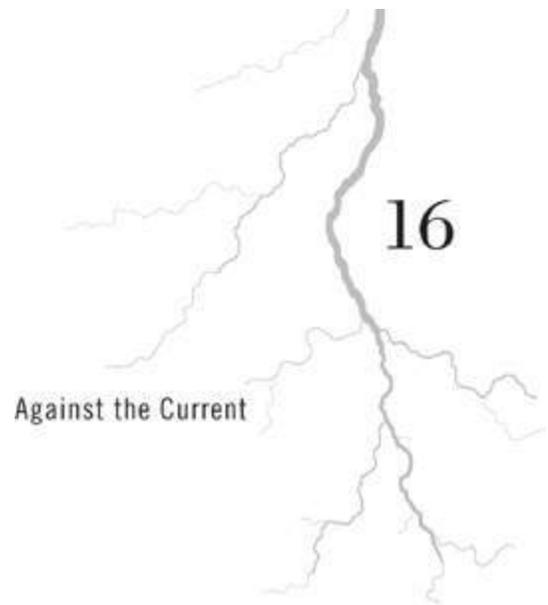
Hatch looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. "Hmm. Surprising." He turned to the guard. "Make it so."

"Yes, sir."

Hatch shook his head as he reclaimed his bottle. Then he said, "All you need is love." He turned and walked back down the corridor, humming.



PART 4



Jaime, Tessa, and I continued our hike west through heavy jungle for two more days. At times the silence between us seemed as stifling as the jungle's humidity. Jaime was angry. He was breaking orders and was leading me only because I had threatened to expose the voice if he didn't. Tessa still hadn't changed her mind about helping me rescue my friends, though I was pretty certain she felt guilty about it.

Late afternoon of the second day, Jaime led us up the steep slope of another hill, then abruptly stopped and dropped his pack on the ground. "This is where we will camp for the night."

"It's not even dark yet," I said.

"Come with me," he said. I followed him to a break in the trees. "There," he said, pointing to a mountain on the opposite side of the river. "That is our destination. It is close. We can make it by tomorrow."

"If it's close, then we should keep going," I said. "The army could move them at any time. They could be traveling right now."

"No," Jaime said, shaking his head. "If they are traveling right now, then it is already too late. We do not want to cross the river at night. There are things in the river that feed most at night. And we cannot

make a fire to warm or dry ourselves after we swim. It is best that we wait until the morning. Once we reach the hill, I will make radio contact again. I will ask our people to tell us about the movements of the army.”

I looked back out over the river. “All right,” I finally said. I had to give him credit. In spite of his disagreement with my plans, he had been more helpful than he had to be. I think that secretly, despite his orders, he wanted me to rescue my friends. “Thank you.”

He looked at me with worried eyes. “Tell me that after you do not die.”

* * *

Food was running low. All we had left from Jaime’s camp was some beef jerky, dried banana chips, and hard rolls with packages of soft cheese. While Tessa and I set up the tent, Jaime left us to look for food. He returned about an hour later with a lumpy backpack.

He laid the pack down and fruit spilled out. Tessa held up an egg-size fruit with dark purple scales.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“It is the *aguaje*,” Jaime said. “It is delicious and very good for you.”

She peeled back the fruit’s skin and took a bite. “It tastes like a carrot.”

“It is very popular,” Jaime said. “Women who live near the rain forest eat it very often. They say it makes them more beautiful.”

“I feel more beautiful already,” Tessa said sarcastically.

Jaime handed me a different fruit. It was yellow and shaped like a bell pepper. “This is the *cocona*. It is also called the Amazon tomato. It is not sweet, but good to eat.”

I took a bite. Its taste fell somewhere between a lime and a tomato. I ate until I’d finished the fruit, then wiped the juice dripping down my chin.

“Thank you,” I said. “Was this hard to find?”

“Not so hard, but you must know what to look for. There are many fruits in the jungle, but much of it is poisonous.”

We finished eating, then set up our camp. It was the earliest that we had gone to bed since we'd started our journey.

* * *

I woke early the next morning. Tessa was still asleep, her soft breath rhythmically filling the tent. Jaime was gone again. I sat up, then crawled toward the tent opening. It was dawn and a new sun had begun its climb over the jungle canopy, painting a baby-blue sky with creamsicle-orange clouds.

Jaime had nearly finished packing up the camp except for our tent. He looked over at me.

"Good morning," I said.

"*Buenos días*," he replied. "Have some fruit."

"Thank you," I said. "You've already packed up."

"*Sí*. We should get an early start."

"How long have you been up?"

"Maybe two hours. I went down to the river to watch for Elgen patrols. One boat went by an hour ago."

I held up a piece of brown fruit. "This is new," I said, examining the avocado-size fruit.

"The *piton*," Jaime said. "I found it this morning."

"It looks like a mango."

"It is a wild mango."

"I love mangoes," I said. "The greatest fruit ever invented."

Tessa crawled out of the tent. "What's the greatest fruit ever invented?"

I held up the fruit. "The mango."

"I love mangoes," she said. "Especially in smoothies with sweetened condensed milk."

"That's not going to happen," I said.

"Eat it all," Jaime said. "We cannot carry much across the river."

"We're crossing the river today?" Tessa asked.

"*Sí, señorita*."

"Good. That means we're getting close."

We finished eating, then Tessa and I packed up our tent and we all hiked down to the river.

Before coming out into the open of the riverbank, Jaime looked for several minutes through his binoculars, then set them down. "It is time to cross the river."

"Where's the boat?" Tessa asked.

"There is no boat," Jaime said.

"Then how do we cross?"

"We swim."

She looked at him in disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. I am not kidding."

"I don't swim. I almost drowned in a hot tub once."

I turned to Jaime. "We've got a problem."

"There is no other way across the river."

"You can't swim?" I asked.

"I don't swim *well*," she replied. "And this isn't a swimming pool. It's a big, scary, muddy river with things in it that eat people. Why can't we just take a bridge?"

"There is not a bridge for a hundred kilometers," Jaime said.

"Then let's get a boat. I mean, how are you going to take the radio across?"

"I have a waterproof bag. I will carry it across."

"You should put *me* in a waterproof bag and carry me across," she said.

"What if we found a log and floated across?" I said.

"We do not have time," Jaime said.

"I don't think we have a choice," I said. "Tessa, will that work?"

"There's still all those creatures in there. What if they're attracted by our glow?"

"The jungle people swim in the river all the time," Jaime said. "It is safer than crossing a street in Los Angeles."

"Not real comforting," Tessa said.

I looked Tessa in the eyes. "Come on, we'll be okay. I'll be right beside you."

She looked exasperated. "All right. Just make sure it's a really big log."

“We’ll do our best.”

Jaime and I went into the jungle and after ten minutes of looking, found a log about seven feet long. In spite of its size, it was very light—like balsa wood.

“This will work,” Jaime said. “This is the kapok tree. Natives make boats out of it.”

* * *

We carried the log to the river’s bank. Then Jaime secured the radio in his waterproof bag, leaving as much air in the bag as possible before sealing it shut. Then we fastened all our packs to the log and pushed it partway into the river.

“Remember,” Jaime said, “the current is strong. You must swim hard with the log.”

He waded into the dark water, holding the radio in front of him. “*Vámonos!*” he shouted, and then he plunged into the water on top of the bag and began kicking fiercely as the water’s current grabbed hold of him.

“Let’s go,” I said to Tessa.

Tessa glanced at me fearfully but still walked forward toward the log.

“I’ll get in front,” I said.

“No,” she said. “Get behind me. In case I let go.”

“Don’t let go,” I said.

“Like I’m going to on purpose!” she said. “It’s a log. There’s no handles!”

I moved behind her. “Here, just hold on to the pack’s straps; it will be easier than holding the log.”

“Okay, okay.” She stepped into the water. “It’s gross and dirty.”

“So are we,” I said. “C’mon, let’s get it over with.” We heaved the log into the river. The log submerged with us in tow, then quickly popped up again. Tessa clung tightly to the straps. She was terrified.

“I hate water!” she shouted, dripping and sputtering.

“You and Zeus,” I said.

“Don’t put us in the same sentence,” she replied.

The current pulled us about twenty feet out into the river, then swept us forward.

“We’ve got to swim hard to get across!” I shouted.

“How do I swim and hold on?”

“Just kick!”

We both kicked as hard as we could but made little headway against the powerful current. Jaime was twenty yards downstream from us but was already approaching the opposite bank. We were having more difficulty, as the log put us at the mercy of the river.

“*Más rápido!*” Jaime shouted to us. “Swim more fast!”

We both kept kicking as hard as we could. We were quickly becoming waterlogged as the river repeatedly washed up over us and our log.

“Keep going,” I said. “We’re almost halfway there.”

I realized that by the time we reached the opposite shore we were going to be separated from Jaime by several hundred yards. Although he was only ten feet from the opposite bank, Jaime was still swimming, trying to keep up with us.

Suddenly Tessa screamed. “What’s that?”

“What?”

“In front of us.”

I looked forward. There was another log ahead of us. Except it wasn’t moving downstream.

“It’s just a log,” I said. “It must be stuck on something.”

“I don’t think it’s a log.”

I looked again. It wasn’t a log. It was a massive caiman. “Oh, crap.”

“Michael . . .”

“Climb up on the log!” I shouted.

We both tried, but the log just rolled back with us, dunking us underneath the water.

After our third attempt, Tessa shouted, “I can’t!” She turned back. “It’s coming!”

“Jaime!” I shouted. “Caiman! Caiman!”

He was far enough away that he looked at us without comprehension. “Get your gun!” I pointed toward the approaching caiman. Jaime began swimming toward the bank.

“Michael!” Tessa screamed. She closed her eyes as the caiman opened its mouth just five feet in front of her.

“Enhance me!” I shouted. “Give me everything.” I pulsed the hardest I ever had. So hard, in fact, that the water around me actually sizzled. The reptile shook violently, then turned sideways and sank. Suddenly, all around us, fish began popping up on the river’s surface. They were everywhere, dozens of them.

“I’m going to faint,” Tessa said.

“Don’t do that,” I said. “Just keep kicking.”

It was another ten minutes before we were close to the opposite bank. Jaime had abandoned the radio and ran down the side of the riverbank to help us. He waded into the river up to his shoulders and grabbed the front of the log and pulled us in to shore. Tessa and I stumbled up to dry ground, then fell to our knees, exhausted. After she’d caught her breath, Tessa screamed at Jaime, “Don’t you ever make me do that again!”

“*Senorita . . .*”

“Don’t you ‘*senorita*’ me!” she shouted. “I almost got eaten by a crocodile.”

“Caiman,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Yeah, I bet you are,” she said.

Jaime looked at me sheepishly.

Tessa took off her shoes and poured the water out of them, then put them back on and stood up. “*Vámonos*,” she said.

I looked at Jaime and shrugged.

We were wet and uncomfortable, and the hike from the river to the top of the mountain took us six more hours. The one good thing was that by the time we reached our destination our clothes were mostly dry—at least as dry as one can hope for when hiking through a tropical rain forest.

From the mountain peak I could see the highway stretching east and west for at least five miles in both directions before it disappeared into the jungle. I could see why Jaime chose this point to attack. The roadway was steep and rugged, and the jungle seemed to spill over the asphalt as if attempting to reclaim the road.

Jaime looked out toward the east with his binoculars, then handed them to me. “That is the direction they will come from.”

I lifted the binoculars and looked out over the fading ribbon of asphalt. “Are you sure this is the only way they can get to Lima?”

“*Sí*. This is the road they came on. I saw them. The road will go through Cuzco, then west to Lima.”

“Is it possible that they’ve already passed?” I asked.

“No. Look closely. There is fruit and dead animals on the road that are not flat. That many trucks would not miss anything.”

I looked out again and could see that he was right. There was some pretty bloated-looking roadkill. I handed him back his binoculars. “Thank you.”

“We will make camp, then radio the voice and see what he knows.”

* * *

We set up our camp a little off the peak on a mild downhill slope where the canopy was thicker. As we had no idea how many days we would be waiting, we took the time to carefully conceal our camp—gathering banana leaves and palm fronds to cover our tent. Jaime created a trip line of vines that would warn us if someone was near.

The sun was fading in the west when we finally stopped to eat dinner. Jaime handed us some reddish-orange pods he had cut open with his knife. The inside of the fruit was white, like boiled lobster, with a dark bean in the center.

“I’ve never seen this,” Tessa said.

“It’s cacao,” Jaime said. “Chocolate.”

“Finally something decent,” Tessa said.

“It will not taste like a chocolate bar,” Jaime said. He pulled out some of the beans. “You suck the flesh off of the cacao bean. Then you chew the bean.”

Tessa and I followed his lead. The fruit surrounding the bean was actually quite good, but the bean itself was bitter with only a vague semblance of chocolate flavor.

“This isn’t chocolate,” Tessa said, clearly disappointed.

“It is what chocolate is made from,” Jaime said.

“Could have fooled me,” she said, spitting out the seed.

“You can have this,” I said, giving her the last *piton*.

We finished eating, then we gathered around the radio that Jaime had concealed behind our tent. We were high enough up that I didn’t need to climb any trees to mount an antenna. I didn’t need to power the radio either. Apparently I had sufficiently recharged the batteries during our previous transmission.

Jaime flipped a switch and the lights of the radio came on. He handed me a headphone. The crisp crackle of static drowned out the jungle’s symphony.

“I want to listen,” Tessa said.

“I only have two headphones,” Jaime said.

“I’ll share,” I said. I flipped the two earpieces around and Tessa sat next to me, both of us holding a speaker to one of our ears. Jaime dialed a number, then said, “Lightning Rod, this is Southern Cross. Over.”

Nothing came back. Jaime signaled again. “Lightning Rod, this is . . .” He was interrupted by three beeps, and then a female voice said, “Southern Cross, we read you. Please confirm.”

“*Diez, uno, uno, uno, nueve, seis, dos.*”

“Please repeat the last two numbers.”

“No,” he said.

“Confirmed,” the woman said. “One moment, please.”

There was a pause, then the voice said, “Southern Cross. Are you still in possession of the jewels.”

“Yes.”

“We are pleased to hear that. At least not everything has gone wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Jaime asked.

“Things have taken a turn for the worse. Hatch has gained control of the Elgen. He has imprisoned the chairman and commandeered the Elgen fleet.”

“*Qué piña!* It could not be worse.”

“Our source has learned that Hatch plans to secure a land base so the Elgen can train soldiers and ultimately build weapons of mass destruction.”

“Weapons of mass destruction?” I said. “You mean nuclear weapons?”

“No,” the voice answered. “The Elgen are developing high-potency EMPs.”

“I know about EMPs,” Tessa said. “Quentin is an EMP. He can shut down machines and stuff.”

“That is right,” the voice said. “A powerful enough EMP device could create an electromagnetic pulse that could conceivably shut down all electrical devices for many thousands of miles.”

“Then EMPs don’t kill people,” I said.

“They will most definitely kill people,” the voice replied. “It’s estimated that up to ten percent of the population would die immediately. If you destroy all electrical devices, you shut down hospitals and all health devices. Anyone on life support would die.”

“But hospitals have backup generators,” Tessa said.

“An EMP doesn’t just stop the source of power, it permanently destroys all electronic circuitry. Lights won’t work. Cars won’t run. Communication will be shut down, including all cell phones and radios. Gas stations won’t be able to pump gas; grocery stores will lose refrigeration; food will rot and people will starve. All business will be brought to a standstill. There will be riots in the streets and looting. It is believed that an EMP may, in the long run, produce as many casualties as a nuclear weapon.”

“How long would it take to get power again?” I asked.

“The problem is, the machinery required to repair or rebuild the infrastructure is also powered by electricity. It might not be possible for a country to rebuild itself.”

“That’s incredibly stupid,” Tessa said.

“It’s shortsighted,” the voice replied. “But electricity has always been the Achilles’ heel of the modern world.”

“How will that benefit the Elgen?” I asked.

“The Elgen will offer aid by helping to rebuild the country’s electrical grid to run off their Starxource plants, ultimately putting them in complete control of the world’s power and economy.”

“Where is this land Hatch plans to conquer?” Jaime asked.

“Hatch’s target is a small country in the South Pacific called Tuvalu. The Elgen have already been there for more than a year and have already constructed a Starxource plant as large as the Peruvian facility that will serve as their administrative building and reeducation center.”

“Doesn’t the country have an army to defend itself?” I asked.

“No. Tuvalu is the size of a small American city. All they have is a police force, and there are more than a hundred Elgen guards to every police officer. The Elgen are also much better armed and trained. The Tuvaluans are a simple people. The Elgen will either slaughter them or turn them into their work force.”

“You mean they’ll make them slaves,” I said.

“Very likely,” the voice said.

“*Qué lío!*” Jaime said. “They are pure evil.”

“The location of Tuvalu is strategic. It will give the Elgen unrestricted access to Hawaii, Australia, Taiwan, China, India, the Philippines, and Japan.”

“This is most horrible news,” Jaime said, rubbing his forehead. “What can be done to stop them?”

“We have leaked information to the leaders of Tuvalu, but it’s falling on deaf ears. The Elgen have just solved the country’s power shortage and are being heralded as heroes. But we have one other chance to stop them. Prior to their attack, the Elgen fleet is sailing to the port of Callao, west of Lima, to pick up the remainder of their force still quartered in Puerto Maldonado. There are thousands of guards stranded after the attack of the Starxource plant.

“They will also be refueling and stocking up on supplies. We estimate that it will take them four or five days to complete their preparations. But once they have left the port, there will be no stopping them. We must strike before they leave.”

“What are your orders?” Jaime asked.

“Sink the *Ampere* while it’s in port.”

“What’s the *Ampere*?” I asked.

“It’s the Elgen’s superyacht,” Tessa said. “I’ve been on it. It’s very cool. It has a helipad, sushi bar—it even has a disco.”

“The *Ampere* is the Elgen command base,” the voice said. “It’s where Hatch operates from.”

“How are we supposed to sink a ship?” I asked.

“You and your friends destroyed their largest and most secure Starxource plant. We’re confident that you can sink a ship.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have my friends with me,” I said. “And the last time we spoke, you told me not to go after them.”

“We were only protecting you,” the voice said. “We believed that the chance of your success against their army was less than the chance of our success. But that’s before Hatch took over. Now we are certain that we have no chance of diplomacy. The Elgen will be pressuring the Peruvian government for blood. You need to rescue your friends. Jaime, do all in your power to assist Michael in this cause. Call in assistance if you have to.”

“Yes, sir. Do you know where the others are?”

“They are still being held in Puerto Maldonado. They nearly escaped but were recaptured outside the compound. Our sources tell us that the army is preparing right now to move them to Lima. So if you expect to breach their compound, you’ll have to move fast.”

“We have a different plan,” Jaime said. “There is a narrow highway they will have to pass through on the way to Lima. We believe it is a place where we could stop them. We just need to know when they are moving.”

“Very well. We’ll alert you when the army is moving.”

“And then what?” I asked.

“After you have rescued your friends, we will instruct you on everything we know about the Elgen fleet and the *Ampere*. Is there anything else you need right now?”

“I want to speak with my mother.”

“I’ll arrange for you to talk. I will give you a time during our next communication.”

“Wait, I have a question,” Tessa said, leaning forward toward the microphone. “Do you know anything about the Amacarra? Are they okay?”

There was a long pause. “The Amacarra tribe no longer exists.”

Tessa turned white. “W-what do you mean?”

“The army massacred the tribe for harboring terrorists.”

Tessa’s eyes welled up with tears. “No!”

“I’m sorry. The army has been ruthless.”

I put my hand on Tessa’s back.

Tessa grabbed her beads, and tears began falling down her face. “My mama . . .”

There was a long pause, then the voice said, “I’m sorry, but we must sign out. There is one more thing you must know. We have been compromised.”

Now Jaime turned white. “How?”

“The army learned of our existence while interrogating the others. They passed it on to the Elgen. They don’t know who or where we are, but they now know that we exist. We have called a few of our agents in the field to come in.”

“This cannot be true,” Jaime said, putting his hand over his eyes.

“I wish it weren’t. We will contact you when the army starts to move. Over.”

The radio went dead. I took the headphone and gave it back to Jaime. The dread was palpable. It was as if a bomb had just gone off in our midst.

Jaime was the first to speak. “They know of us . . . ,” he said, slowly shaking his head.

I looked at Tessa. She was sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” I said, returning my hand to her back.

“They were so innocent,” she said. She covered her eyes with her hand.

I didn’t know what to say. I just kept rubbing her back. After a few minutes her sobbing slowed, turning to a soft whimper. Then she stopped completely. She held her hands at her temples, her fingers digging into her hair. Then she looked up at me. Her eyes were red and swollen. “They’re going to pay for this. We’re going to make them pay.”



After all the bad news we'd just received, the next few days passed in misery. We were low on food, and edible fruit was not very plentiful where we were camped. Now that we were close to the road, Jaime didn't dare go out foraging. "Too risky," he said. He told us that the army would likely send out an advance patrol before they moved.

The second day it rained hard and for most of the day we just sat in our tent, with nothing to do but sleep to escape the malaise. Jaime acted calm, but I could tell that he was going crazy inside. Tessa was not as stoic. She broke down crying at least a dozen times. The Amacarra tribe was the closest thing to family she had.

Early in the morning of the third day the rain finally stopped, and Jaime led us down the rugged terrain of the south side of the mountain near the highway. We needed to scout the pass to make our plans.

The road was covered on both sides by thick forest, which would be advantageous to us. The biggest question we faced was how to stop an army. Actually, we didn't need to stop all of the trucks, just the ones in front, creating a traffic jam.

The problem was, anything obvious might look like an attack and surprise was vital. If four thousand soldiers dug in for battle, we were through.

For nearly an hour we crouched down in the jungle, looking out over the highway, away from the road, in case an army patrol drove by.

“How many trucks do you think there will be?” I asked Jaime.

“Many,” he said.

“Like how many?” I asked. “Twenty? Thirty?”

“Maybe two hundred. Or more.”

“Two hundred? How will we know what truck they’re being kept in?”

Jaime shook his head. “It will not be a simple thing.”

“I can find them,” Tessa said.

I turned to her. “How?”

“I can sense electricity. That’s how I knew you were electric when I met you. It’s the same way Nichelle sensed powers.”

“Nichelle could sense powers?”

“If she didn’t, she wouldn’t be able to feed off your electricity. Hatch once had us walk through the academy blindfolded to find the electric kids. Nichelle and I are really not that different.”

“Believe me, you’re different.”

“Personality-wise,” she said. “Nichelle’s all Goth and all that. But the scientists at the academy said we were similar in physiology. Nichelle was better at finding electricity than I was, but I can still do it. I just need to get closer than she did.”

“How close?”

“Maybe thirty feet.”

I looked at the lush jungle encroaching on the road. “That will work. We stop the convoy, then we’ll move along behind the trees until you feel something.”

“Then what?” Tessa asked.

“I shock the guards, we open the trucks, and we free my friends.”

“How do we stop the trucks?”

“The question is, how do we do it without causing suspicion.”

“Look,” Jaime said. “That sign.” He pointed to a yellow, diamond-shaped precaution sign that showed stones showering down on a road.

“Falling rocks,” I said.

“We could roll large rocks into the road,” Jaime said. “They would think it was a rock slide and not suspect us.” He pointed to a rocky crag jutting out from the jungle. “There are rocks up there.”

We followed Jaime back up the mountain. The terrace Jaime had seen from the road was littered with boulders from an earlier slide. Using a tree branch as a lever, we helped Jaime position a dozen or more large stones on the edge of the precipice.

“When they come, we will push the mountain down in front of them,” Jaime said.

“Or on them,” Tessa said.

“Just as long as we stop them,” I said. The terrace was also high enough that we could see the highway for several miles in either direction. “This is a good lookout.”

“Sí,” Jaime said, sitting down on one of the rocks.

I pointed down to where we had first descended. “Tessa and I will wait there on the opposite side of the highway. After you stop them, we’ll work our way down from behind the trees until we find them.”

“Then how do we get away?” Tessa asked.

I looked back over the highway. “If they’re chasing us, we’ll have to head down the mountain. It’s thicker jungle on that side. We’ll have a better chance of hiding and ambushing them.”

Jaime nodded with approval. “If we are separated, we will meet in Cuzco,” he said. “There is a small hostel near the Plaza de Armas, the town square. It is owned by a friend of mine and will be safe.”

“What’s the name of the place?” I asked.

“Hostel El Triunfo,” he said.

“El Triunfo,” I repeated, committing the name to memory.

Jaime grinned. “Yes. The triumph. If we make it, then it will be well named.”

I didn’t like his “if.”

* * *

By noon we had hiked back to our camp. We had a lunch of what Jaime had scavenged on the way back, mostly berries and some weird pod fruit that tasted like boiled Styrofoam. We also had snails, which Jaime had pulled from their shells and eaten raw. Tessa and I both tried one. I gagged and she spit hers out. We decided to stick with the fruit.

As the day waned, Tessa went back inside herself, silently fondling the red bead necklace her mother had given her when they'd said good-bye. I understood her anger. It's how I felt when Hatch took my mother. But I wondered if what had happened to her Amacarra mother had rekindled deeper feelings about the loss of her real family. I wouldn't have been surprised.

Around eight o'clock Tessa and I were just lying in the tent when we heard Jaime talking.

"What's he doing?" I asked.

Tessa sat up. "It sounds like someone's out there."

We crawled out of the tent. Jaime was standing near the radio. In front of him were two Peruvian men. Between them were three large packs and a duffel bag. As we approached, they turned to look at us.

"Who are these guys?" I asked Jaime.

"These are my amigos," Jaime said.

One of them started to put out his hand to me, then stopped.

"*Me electrocutará?*" he asked.

"*Espero que no.*" Jaime turned to me. "He's afraid you might shock him."

"I don't shock friends." I looked the man over, then said, "I'm assuming you're a friend."

He put out his hand and said with a heavy accent, "I am Xavier."

"And this is Pablo," Jaime said, pointing to the other man.

"I'm Michael. This is Tessa."

"*Hermosa,*" Xavier said, looking at Tessa. "Beautiful girl."

Tessa didn't smile. She looked at Jaime. "What's going on? Why are they here?"

"We need more help. Sit down," he said, pointing to the ground. We all sat. Jaime said to Pablo, "*Necesito su mapa.*"

The man retrieved a map from his backpack and unfolded it on the ground before us. Jaime pulled a small penlight from his pocket and shined it on the map. The words on the map were in Spanish, but I guessed it was a map of where we were.

“Our camp is here,” Jaime said, touching his finger to the paper. He slid it down toward the single red line denoting the highway. “This is where we put the rocks. And this is where we will stop the army. You will be here.” He pointed to a space across from the highway. “Your friends will be somewhere along this road. As you look for them, we will be watching you with binoculars. After you have found them all, you will go south through the jungle. To keep the army from following you, we will make a distraction over here.” He touched a place about a quarter mile from where Tessa and I planned to start.

“What kind of distraction?” I asked.

“My friends have brought three gun sentries like the ones I had at the camp. We will make them fire on the army. They will think they are being attacked from down there,” he said, touching the map. “While we will go back over the mountain and escape on the river, you will go south through the jungle as fast as you can go. In a few days we will find you and bring you to Cuzco.”

“How will you find us in the jungle?” I asked.

“With this.” He reached into the same backpack and brought out a small black iPod.

“An iPod?” Tessa said.

“It is like the one we gave you before,” he said to me. “This too has a GPS signal. It will tell us where you are. I will also give you a small radio. But I will not try to contact you right away. The army will be searching these mountains and listening for transmissions.”

“What if you’re caught?” Tessa said. “Then what will we do?”

“I have friends in Puerto Maldonado that will help you. They know the signal of your device.”

I looked at Jaime’s friends. They were looking at us intently even though I doubted they understood a word of what Jaime was saying in English.

“You sure you can trust these guys?” I asked.

“With our lives,” Jaime said. “They are proven. One more thing.” He walked over and picked up a backpack, then walked back to us. “They have brought us food.” Jaime dropped the pack between us.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you,” Tessa said.

“*Muchas gracias*,” I said to the men.

“*Para servirle*,” the older of the men said.

“Eat much,” Jaime said. “You will need your strength.”

I reached into the pack and brought out two Inca Kolas, a round of cheese, hard-boiled eggs, mini loafs of bread, some shish kebabs wrapped in foil, and some dip in plastic containers. We hadn’t had protein in days, so after drinking some of our colas we unwrapped the kebabs. The meat was dark and cold but tasty.

“This is good,” I said, stripping the meat off the skewer. “What is it?”

“*Anticuchos de corazón*,” Jaime answered.

“Anti-what?”

“Cow heart.”

Tessa grimaced. “We’re eating heart?”

“It’s meat,” I said. “What’s in here?” I lifted one of the plastic containers.

“*Causa*,” Jaime said. “It is famous in Peru. It has potatoes and avocados and tuna fish.”

“Jungle casserole,” I said. “Are you going to eat with us?”

“We have food here. *Cuy*.”

“What’s *cuy*?” I asked.

“Roasted guinea pig.”

“Knock yourself out,” Tessa said.

Tessa and I both ate until we were full. I had two eggs, half the container of *causa*, which I ate with my bread, two kebabs, and a banana, all of which I downed with a warm but delicious Inca Kola.

After we were full, we wrapped up everything we hadn’t eaten and thanked the men again. They were sitting in their own circle eating and talking quietly in Spanish.

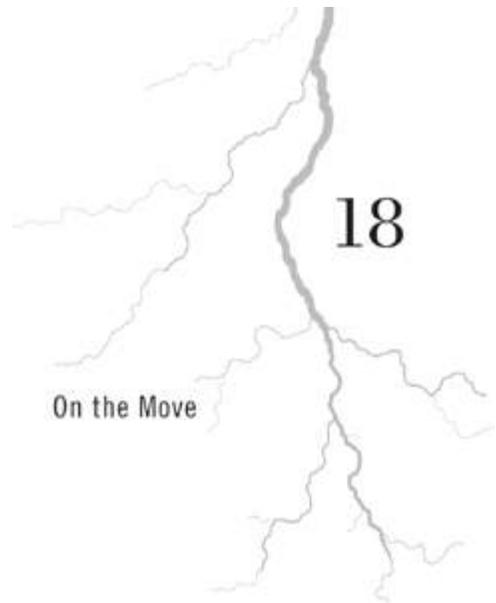
“We’re going to sleep,” I said. “*Buenas noches*.”

“Good night,” Jaime said.

Tessa and I went back to the tent.

“That was good,” she said. “I wonder how long before the food runs out and we’re living off snails.”

“I’m afraid we’ll be eating snails very soon,” I said. “Let’s just hope we have my friends with us when we do.”



“Mr. Michael, Mr. Michael.”

I opened my eyes to see Jaime leaning over me. It was still dark. “What?” I asked groggily.

“The voice has signaled us.”

I sat up. “The voice?”

He nodded. “Come.”

I looked over at Tessa, who was still asleep, then climbed out of the tent and followed Jaime to the radio. Our camp was lit by nothing but the moon, and Jaime had even covered the radio dials with leaves. I didn’t see them at first, but in the shadows the other two Peruvian men were dressed and ready to go, standing next to their packs.

“How do they signal you?” I asked.

Jaime showed me a small blinking device that looked like a simple pager. “With this.” He turned on the radio and a voice immediately came over the speaker.

“Southern Cross,” a female voice said. “Do you read me? Southern Cross, do you . . .”

Jaime lifted the microphone close to his mouth and said in a soft voice, “This is Southern Cross.”

“Please confirm,” the voice said.

“Diez, uno, uno, uno, nueve, seis, dos.”

“Confirmed. Please receive this message. The army is on the move east on the PE-30C highway. I repeat: The army is on the move east on the PE-30C highway. Do you copy?”

“I copy,” Jaime said.

“Transmission complete,” the woman said. “Good luck.” The radio went dead.

He looked at me. “It is time to go.”

“I’ll wake Tessa,” I said. I went back to the tent. “Tessa.” She didn’t move so I lightly shook her.

She woke with a start. “What?”

“It’s time,” I said. “They’re coming.”

“Who’s coming?”

“The army.”

Tessa pushed her hair back from her eyes, then sat up. “Let’s go.”

She pulled on her shoes then followed me out. Jaime and the other men were standing near the outside of the tent waiting for us. “*Vámonos*,” he said.

We followed Jaime down the mountain, moving quickly through the dark jungle. Jaime’s friends were fascinated by Tessa’s and my glow, and Jaime reminded us to pull our sleeves down as far as possible.

It took us nearly forty minutes to reach the stony outcrop—twice as long as it had taken in daylight. Except for a few black stratus clouds, the sky was clear and the stars shone like punctured holes in a black curtain. The tension around us was as thick as the darkness. Or maybe it was just fear. Something told me it might be the last night of my life. I shivered at the thought.

From the edge of the outcrop we saw them. The lights of the army’s caravan stretched on for miles, a long, dark snake, slithering steadily toward us, two abreast. It was the first time I fully realized how improbable our task was. I reminded myself that my friends were somewhere in that snake’s belly and we were their only chance of escape.

“Look at all those trucks,” Tessa said softly. “There’s got to be a hundred of them.”

“At least,” I said. I took a deep breath of the crisp night air. “How long until they reach us?”

“Maybe twenty minutes,” Jaime said.

“Then we better go.”

He slipped the pack from his shoulder and propped it up against a stone. As he dug through it, he asked, “Do you have your GPS?”

I took the iPod out of my pocket and showed him.

“Good. And here is your radio. The frequency is 1717. Can you remember that?”

“Seventeen, seventeen. The number of electric children,” I said. “Twice.”

“Sí.” His voice fell. “If you are captured, you must pulse and destroy the radio before it is found. Understand?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“When you have found all your friends, raise your hand to signal us. We will activate the sentries.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I will see you in Cuzco where?”

“Hostel Triumph near the town square.”

“Sí. El Triunfo,” he said. He looked into my eyes. “Good luck, Mr. Michael. Rescue your friends.”

We embraced. I looked once more out toward our enemy, then nodded to Tessa, and we started down the slope, carefully making our way in the dark toward the highway. As quiet as we tried to be, our hike down was heralded by the screeching of birds and curious monkeys in the trees above us.

At street level we could no longer see the stony outcrop or the lights of the advancing caravan. We could only guess how close the trucks were. I got down on my knees and put my ear to the asphalt road like I had seen Native Americans do in old Westerns, listening for buffalo. I could hear the deep, low rumble of the distant convoy.

We crossed the highway about twenty yards down from the spot the rock slide would take place and disappeared into the darkness of the jungle, waiting behind the waist-high roots of a lupuna tree. Neither of us spoke and the only sound was the chattering of monkeys

and the millions of insects around us that sounded like the buzzing of electricity.

“Do you think they’ll be in the first truck?” Tessa asked.

“No. They’ll probably want some kind of a buffer.”

“Do you think they’ll all be in the same truck?”

I shook my head. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

* * *

The minutes dragged on, raising my anxiety until my heart pounded like an African drum. I felt like a man with a noose around his neck, waiting for the floor to fall out from beneath him. When the caravan arrived, we could not only hear the rumbling of the trucks and the screeching of animals at its approach, but we could feel the convoy vibrating the jungle with a million pounds of metal.

Neither of us breathed when the first of the trucks’ lights hit us. Then the first vehicles passed, a small jeep with a mounted machine gun followed by a tank. Behind it were five personnel transports painted in camouflage green. They drove past us without incident.

“Where’s the rock slide?” Tessa whispered.

“Come on, Jaime,” I said. “Roll the rocks.”

Then I saw the problem. Jaime had miscalculated the density of the jungle. The rocks were crashing against trees, not even making it to the road. Only a few of the smaller rocks actually reached the asphalt, and they were small enough that they didn’t even slow the trucks.

“It’s not working,” Tessa said, her voice pitched.

My chest constricted in panic as I watched the convoy pass.

“It has to work,” I said. “This is our only chance.” I turned to her. “Have any of my friends passed?”

“I’m not sure. The trucks are going pretty fast.”

“We’ve got to stop them somehow.”

“Try short-circuiting them,” she said.

I focused on the nearest truck and pulsed. Nothing happened. “My pulse isn’t strong enough.”

“It was powerful,” Tessa said. “I felt it. Can you magnetize them?”

“They’re too heavy. It would only pull me to them.” I thought for a moment. “But maybe if I didn’t try to pull them toward me . . .” I looked at Tessa. “Enhance me.”

She took my hand. “Okay, go.”

I reached out, exerting as much magnetism as I could, focusing not on the vehicles but on the space between two of them. Suddenly two trucks veered into each other. There was a loud crash as they hit and locked bumpers, then one of the trucks, which was slightly ahead of the other, rolled over on its side, blocking the road. The crash set off a chain reaction as the vehicles behind them—their visibility limited by darkness—rammed into the vehicles in front of them. When the convoy had come to a halt, we could hear doors slamming and the shouts of soldiers furiously yelling at each other in Spanish.

“That should hold them for a while,” Tessa said.

“Let’s find my friends,” I said. “Do you feel anything?”

“Not yet.”

We moved quickly beneath the shadow of the trees, about twenty-five feet from the edge of the road. Suddenly, Tessa stopped and pointed at an idling green transport near our side of the road. “There,” she said. “Someone’s in that truck.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Yeah. It’s Zeus.”

“You can tell who it is?”

“I can smell him.”

“He doesn’t smell *that* strong.”

“Not him, his power. Everyone’s power *smells* different.”

I wondered what I smelled like. “Let’s get him,” I said.

The trucks were all jammed up next to one another, making it difficult to find a safe route. We crept to the edge of the jungle’s shadow. Even though we were hidden by the dark, we knew that the soldiers might have night-vision goggles so we stayed low, moving cautiously. As we neared the truck Zeus was in, the driver’s door opened and the driver got out. He walked around to the truck’s rear and lit a cigarette. He was only about thirty feet in front of us.

“I can hit him from here,” I said. While he was slightly turned, I made a lightning ball and threw it at him. I missed, and the blue-

green sphere popped against the truck behind him. The soldier threw his cigarette down, then turned around to see what had made the noise.

“You missed,” Tessa said.

“Yeah, I know.” I quickly formed another one and threw it. This one caught him square in the back, dropping him to the ground. “Let’s go.”

We moved in until we were next to the man, hidden from the rest of the convoy by the truck.

“There’s someone else in the truck’s cab,” Tessa said.

“I’ll take care of it.” I made another ball and lobbed it into the truck’s cab. There was a flash of blue light, then the sound of a head hitting the dashboard. “Got him.”

We got down on our hands and knees and crawled underneath the truck, coming up at its rear. The dented grill of the truck behind it was only six feet back. It looked as if it had rear-ended the truck in front of it then backed off. There were soldiers in the truck’s cab.

“There are men in there,” I said. “They’ll see if we open the back door. I’ll have to take them out.”

“What’s the door like?” Tessa asked.

I looked up from beneath the bumper. There were two doors. A thick chain with a padlock was wrapped between the door handles.

“It’s locked with a chain.”

“How do we get that off?” Tessa asked.

“I’ll check the driver for keys.”

As I started to crawl back, there was a massive blast of electricity, blowing the doors off their hinges and into the windshield of the truck behind us. For a moment we both froze, unsure of what had just happened.

“Zeus found his power,” Tessa said.

“So much for stealth,” I said.

Tessa and I crawled back under the center of the truck as soldiers began running toward us. Zeus jumped down off the truck’s bed, his legs almost within reach of us. Electricity was sparking between his fingers and legs. He tore the smoking RESAT off his chest and flung it

to the ground, then began blasting everything and everyone around him. "Eat lightning!" he shouted.

"Zeus!" I whispered loudly.

Zeus stopped and looked around. "Who said that?"

"Down here. It's me, Michael."

"Michael?" He crouched down. "Where did you come from?"

"Get down here. Fast."

He got on his knees and crawled under the truck. He stopped when he saw Tessa. "That explains why I was suddenly so powerful."

"I've always made you a better man than you are," Tessa said. "No hello, sweetheart?"

"I was a little busy," he said.

"It's good to see you too," she said coldly.

"I take it you two know each other," I said.

Tessa's eyes narrowed. "I thought I did."

Zeus said, "It wasn't all my fault. . . ."

"Great, you have history," I said. "You can settle this when no one's trying to kill us."

Tessa pointed a finger at Zeus. "Later," she said. "We'll talk later."

"Can't wait," Zeus mumbled beneath his breath.

"Can you sense anyone else?" I asked Tessa.

"There's someone over in that truck," Tessa said. "I don't recognize the smell."

"Do you know who it is?" I asked Zeus.

"No. We were all blindfolded."

"Let's get them," I said.

The truck was in the far row closest to the mountain, two vehicles back from where we were. It was dark, as Zeus had blown the lights out of the trucks around us. As we crept toward it, we could hear the shouting of soldiers, but the only soldiers we could see were either unconscious or electrocuted. "Keep your eyes open," I said.

From under the truck I saw a pair of boots. I made a lightning ball and threw it at the soldier. It exploded against his shin, dropping him to the ground. Then Zeus and I slunk around the back, while Tessa stayed sheltered next to its back wheel.

"Can you blow off its lock?" I asked Zeus.

“Yes, give me a hand,” he said to Tessa, reaching his hand out to her.

“I’ll do it from here,” she said.

Zeus slid around the side of the truck, checked for soldiers, then pointed at the door and fired. Amplified by Tessa, the heat of his electricity actually melted the metal latch around the lock. “It’s open,” he whispered.

I ran around and pulled back one of the doors. McKenna was standing inside. Her skin was red and smoke was rising off of her. She had already melted through her cuffs, and her RESAT was on the ground and smoking as well.

“McKenna!”

“Michael?”

“Get down here, fast.”

She ran to the end of the truck and jumped down. “It’s so good to see you,” she said. “What’s happening? I’m suddenly superpowerful. My RESAT just exploded.”

“It’s me,” Tessa said.

McKenna looked at her quizzically. “Tesla?”

“Long story,” she said. “And it’s Tessa now.”

“Come on. We’ve got to rescue the others,” I said. “Who’s next?”

Suddenly there was a burst of gunfire. Bullets hit next to me on the truck.

“That was close,” Zeus said.

“Looks like they’ve got night-vision goggles,” I said.

“I have an idea,” McKenna said. “Everyone close your eyes on the count of three. One, two, three.”

We covered our eyes. McKenna stood up and flashed so brightly that even with my eyes covered I could see the light. She had literally turned the night to day.

When I opened my eyes she was crouched back down next to me. “That was crazy,” I said. “They could all see you.”

“They could see us anyway with their night-vision goggles,” she said. “I just took care of that.”

“I bet they’re all blind now,” Zeus said.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said. “Who’s next?”

“I can’t sense anyone,” Tessa said.

I knew that there was a weakness in my plan. Tessa wouldn’t be able to detect Ostin, Jack, or Wade. We needed to find Ian.

“They must be farther back. Let’s keep going.”

The four of us crept single file down between the trucks. Suddenly Tessa pointed. “There,” she said.

Zeus and I crept low to the cab of the truck. The driver’s-side window was open and I could hear Peruvian folk music playing from inside the cab. I produced a lightning ball about the size of a cantaloupe, then lobbed it into the cab’s open window. It exploded louder than any I had made before. We ran around to the rear, and Zeus blew off the back door. Then McKenna and I climbed in while Zeus and Tessa stood watch. Ian was inside waiting for us. “Tesla sure makes me see a long way,” he said.

“It’s Tessa,” she and McKenna said simultaneously.

McKenna melted off his bands. “I’m glad we found you,” I said. “We need your help finding everyone else.”

“We’ve got other problems,” he said. “The soldiers are gathering on both sides. There’s thousands of them behind us, about a hundred yards that way,” he said, pointing toward the back of the convoy. “They’re getting ready to move in.”

“Are we surrounded?”

“Just on the road.”

The sky was beginning to lighten a little as dawn was coming. “They’re probably waiting for daylight. Where are the rest of our guys?”

“You passed Ostin,” he said. “He’s back there. The last I saw of the others, they were behind us.”

“All the way back?”

“No. Maybe ten, fifteen trucks back.”

We ran two trucks back and freed Ostin, who was overjoyed to see us all.

“What’s the plan?” he asked.

“Simple,” Tessa said. “Find everyone, run away.”

“Who are you?” Ostin said, looking at her.

“Tessa,” she said.

“Like Tesla,” he said.

“Almost,” she said.

“What do you do?”

“I make people more electric.”

“Cool,” he said.

“Wade’s there,” Ian said. “Seven trucks back. Just behind the jeep with the machine gun. But there are soldiers everywhere. Some are walking around.”

“We better get off the road,” I said.

We returned to the shadow of the jungle, passing all the trucks between us and Wade. When we reached Wade’s truck, Ian stopped us. “There are soldiers in his truck and the truck next to him.”

“I’ll clear the way,” Zeus said. “Turn it on, Tessa.” He reached out and blasted both trucks with such force that it actually rocked them.

“Looks like we’re good,” Ian said. “For a minute.”

We ran to the truck and opened the back door. Wade was still bound to the wall and unable to move. Ian hadn’t mentioned that he wasn’t alone.

“Stop!” a soldier shouted, pointing his gun at me. I pulsed, knocking the man back against the wall.

I ran in and grabbed Wade’s bands and melted through them. He looked at me in disbelief. “Michael. Where did you come from?”

“Idaho,” I said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Did you find Jack?”

“Not yet,” I said. “We’ve just got him and Taylor to rescue, then we’re out of here.”

We climbed down from the truck bed.

“Sorry, man,” Ian said. “I don’t know how I missed that guy in there.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I didn’t. Where are Taylor and Jack?”

“I can’t see them.”

“What do you mean? You can’t see that far?”

“No, with Tessa around I can see past the last truck. They’re just not in any of them. They’re gone.”

“What do you mean, they’re gone?” Wade said. “You’ve got to find Jack.”

"I'm telling you, he's not here. Neither of them are."

"But you said you saw them earlier," I said.

"They were with us when we left."

I looked at Ostin, hoping he had an idea. He just shrugged. "Maybe they escaped."

I turned back to Ian. "So far all the transport trucks had big chains on back. Look for chains."

"All right." He was quiet a moment, then said, "I see one. It's the truck Taylor was in, it's open. But she's not there."

"How can you tell it's the one Taylor was in?" I asked.

"There's still electric residue." He kept looking. "I can see another truck open. There are leg manacles." He turned to me. "Jack escaped."

"Or someone let them go," Ostin said. "Are they together?"

"I don't know."

"Can you track Taylor like you did back at the academy?"

"I might be able to follow her residue. We've got to get close to the truck she was in."

"How far down?" I asked.

"About fifteen more trucks. But there are soldiers all along here."

"Back to the jungle," I said.

Fortunately, the farther back we went, the more the soldiers seemed unaware that their prisoners had escaped. They were just talking or sleeping, waiting for the road jam to clear. When we got to Taylor's truck, there was a RESAT lying on the ground with cut bands.

"This is where she was," Ian said.

"Her RESAT was cut off."

"It had to be turned off first," I said. "Or it would kill her."

"Who would cut it off?" Zeus asked.

"Probably the same guy who took them out," Ostin said, pointing at two soldiers lying facedown on the ground.

"Where did she go?" I asked Ian.

Ian looked around for a moment, then pointed south toward the trees. "Two sets of footprints. They ran off into the jungle."

"Jack and Taylor?"

"I don't know. But I can't see Jack anywhere else."

“Let’s go,” I said. When everyone else had disappeared into the jungle, I stopped at the side of the road and raised both hands.

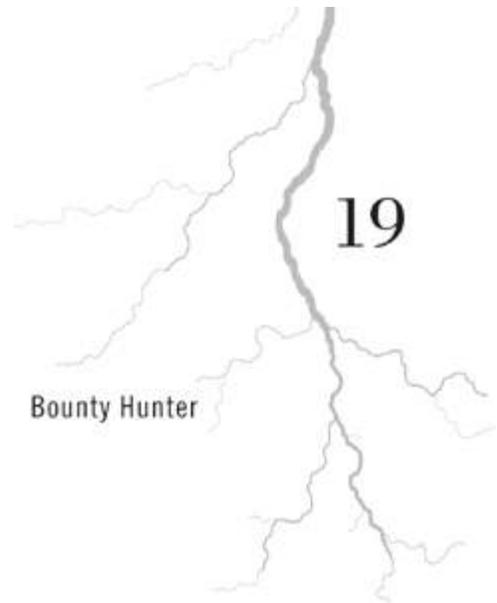
“What are you doing?” Ostin asked. “They’ll see you!”

Suddenly the sound of machine guns erupted from the hillside.

“They’re firing at us!” Zeus shouted.

“No,” I said. “They’re ours. Let’s get out of here.”

All around us the soldiers began jumping out of their trucks, pulling out their weapons. As Jaime had planned, they were facing the opposite direction as us as we plunged unseen into the dark jungle.



Taylor woke, groggy and disoriented. She was moving, she could tell that, but not by her own power. Someone was carrying her over his shoulder, fireman-style. Her stomach hurt where the man's shoulder dug into it. The man carrying her was muscular and lean, but panting heavily. *Who is it?* She focused on his thoughts.

I've got to rest. If I could get close enough to get his gun. Too bad he's got that helmet. If Taylor could just reboot him . . .

Taylor recognized Jack's thoughts.

I don't know how much longer I can go without water.

A few minutes later Jack said out loud, "C'mon, dude. I've got to rest. We've been walking for hours."

"And we've yonks to go, mate," the voice said with an Australian accent. "Keep walkin'."

Put down that gun, and we'll see how tough you are.

First chance I get I'm bucking wild on you.

Taylor felt guilty letting Jack carry her, but she was too weak to walk on her own. Her joints felt like rubber. *What did they do to me?*

Ten minutes later, Jack carried her over a stream. He slipped on a rock and caught himself before he fell, but not without twisting his ankle. She could feel his pain in his thoughts. When they reached the

other side, he stumbled and, protecting Taylor, fell to his knees, then side, letting Taylor fall on top of him.

“Get up!” the man shouted.

“What are you going to do, shoot me?”

“I might.”

“Do it. Then you can carry her yourself.”

“Up with you!” the man shouted.

“I need rest. And I need water.”

There was a short pause, then the man said, “All right, ya bludger. Just five minutes. You can drink from the stream.”

Jack forced himself to his feet.

“Don’t try anythin’ stupid or I’ll shoot ya both.”

“I’m not running,” Jack said as he stumbled over to the stream. He knelt down on the bank and splashed water in his face, then cupped his hands and drank from it.

“I’m sure it’s got all sorts of nasties,” the man said, drinking from his own canteen.

Jack took another drink. Then he walked back over and fell down next to Taylor. He noticed her eyes fluttering. She forced them open and looked into his eyes. “Jack?” she said weakly.

“Shhh,” he said, shaking his head.

“Where are we?”

He put his finger over his mouth and tilted his head toward the man. For the first time Taylor saw who Jack had been thinking about. The Australian was tall, dressed in the black-and-red uniform of an Elgen district leader. He was holding a pistol. He also wore the attack helmet the Elgen donned whenever they came after her, which explained why she couldn’t reboot him. He suddenly looked at her.

“So yer awake, are ya?”

“Who are you?” Taylor asked.

“An opportunist,” the man said. “You’re a very valuable catch, sheila. There’s a bounty on yer head. Two and a half million soles. That’s almost a million dollars American. And my pack mule here,” he said, pointing his pistol at Jack, “has a fifty-thousand-dollar bounty.”

The man walked closer, but kept his distance. “Now that you’re awake, let me tell you how this works. If you try to escape, I shoot yer

friend here. If he tries to escape, I shoot you. And don't pretend you don't care. I was in Pasadena at the academy when yer group shut it down. I know about you Electroclan. You look out for each other."

"Where's everyone else?" Taylor asked.

"No idea," he said. "Probably still with the army, 'less someone rescued them. I 'spect that's what the whole bloody jam up was about."

"Why are we with you?"

"The Peruvian army had no interest in collecting all that bounty—but I do. And since I know how yer group works, I looked at the path to Lima and decided where yer friends were mostly likely to try to rescue you. They didn't disappoint. In all the confusion, I snatched you and yer friend here and headed off into the jungle before the army knew what happened."

"Where are you taking us?"

"I just told you. To collect the bounty."

"Where?"

"Why would you need to know that?" He pointed his pistol at Jack. "Time's up, mate. Get up."

Jack looked impossibly weary but still forced himself to his feet. Then he bent over to lift Taylor.

"It's okay," she said. "I can walk."

"He can carry you, doll face," the man said.

"I told you I can walk," Taylor said. "If he helps me." She took Jack's hand.

Jack suddenly understood. *Can you read my mind?*

Taylor subtly nodded.

Is there another reason you want to walk? Jack thought.

She nodded.

To slow us down?

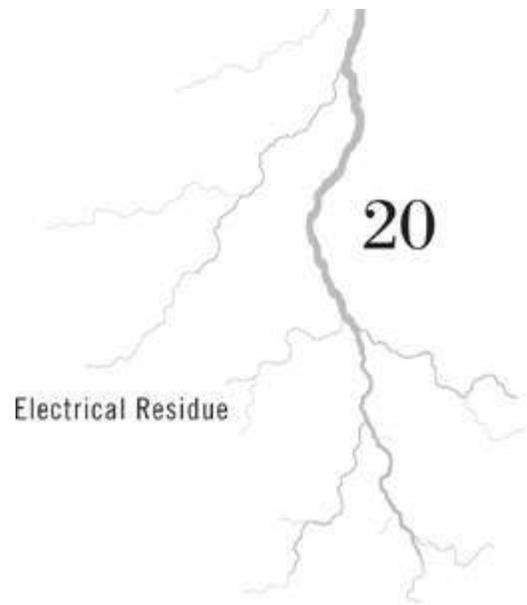
She nodded again.

Do you think someone's trying to save us?

"Yes," she said.

"Yes what?" the guard asked.

Taylor squeezed Jack's hand. "Yes. I can walk."



“Who was that firing?” Ostin asked.

“It’s just a machine,” I said. “Jaime and his friends set it up.”

“You found Jaime?”

“He found me,” I said.

“And who is Tessa?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

We had traveled nearly a mile from the road before the gunfire started to slow. I wondered if the army had discovered they were fighting robotic turrets instead of real people.

Suddenly, Ian stopped walking. “This is really weird,” he said, looking around.

“What’s weird?” I asked.

“The trail’s hard to follow, because Taylor’s residue only shows up occasionally on trees and bushes. I should see it on the ground.”

“Maybe someone’s carrying her,” Ostin said.

“That could be,” Ian said.

“We should measure the depth of the footprints,” Ostin said.

Ian and Ostin both crouched down next to one of the footprints.

“Could I get some light?” Ostin asked. McKenna lit up her hand and held it close. “Thanks,” Ostin said. He ran his hand along an

indentation in the rich soil. "Hmm," he said. "Interesting."

"Are those Taylor's?" I asked.

"Not unless Taylor has size eleven feet and is wearing boots," Ostin said.

"One of these footprints is deeper than the other," Ian said. "I think Ostin's right. Someone's carrying her. That's why I'm only seeing her residue when she brushes up against something."

"Can you tell if it's Jack carrying her?" Wade asked.

"Why would Jack be carrying her?" McKenna asked.

"Let's just keep going," I said.

We hurried on through the thick jungle with Ian in front and McKenna lighting the way for the rest of us.

After an hour Ian said, "We're gaining on them."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"The residue is fresher."

We crossed over a stream. The sun was peeking above the canopy and it was now light enough that we could see without McKenna's help.

"Look," Ian said. He pointed to a grouping of footprints in the dirt. "It looks like they stopped here. Whoever was carrying Taylor must have put her down. I can see residue everywhere." He pointed at the ground. "Now there are three prints. Taylor must be walking on her own."

"Whoever was carrying her must have gotten tired," I said. "Let's keep going."

We increased our pace. About forty-five minutes later, Ian said, "I see them."

"Is it Jack?" Wade asked.

"Yes. Jack, Taylor, and an Elgen guard. He's holding a gun on them."

"How far ahead of us are they?"

"Maybe a mile. Wait." He turned his head a little. "There are trucks. It looks like he's meeting up with someone. There's a dirt road. . . . It looks like . . . six more Elgen guards."

"Can we reach them before they meet up?" I asked.

"No. They're just about there."

“And they’ve got trucks?”

“Two of them.”

“We’ve got to get there before they drive away,” I said. “Hurry!”

In spite of our weariness, we again quickened our pace, this time to almost a run. Ten minutes later Ian said, “They’ve reached the trucks.”

“Faster!” I shouted even though I doubted we could be.

A few minutes later Ian said, “They’ve tied up Taylor and Jack, and they’re putting them in the trucks. But I don’t think they’re in a hurry. Some of them are sitting down.”

“Thank goodness,” Ostin said, panting.

A few minutes later I asked Ian, “What’s going on?”

“It looks like they’re arguing.”

“Who’s arguing?” I asked.

“The guards.”

“Let’s hope they keep arguing,” I said. Just a few minutes later we reached them, stopping less than fifty yards from the guards. I couldn’t see the men, but through the trees I could see the bright red of one of the trucks.

“They’re still fighting,” Ian said. “I think it’s getting pretty heated.”

“Are they armed?”

“To the teeth. Each of them has a sidearm. Plus a knife, baton, and grenades—standard Elgen utility belt.”

“We need a plan,” I said.

“On it,” Ostin said. He cradled his head in his hand for a moment, then said, “The most important thing is to draw them away from Taylor and Jack.”

“And not get killed,” Wade said.

“That too,” Ostin said. He found a stick, then, kneeling on one knee, drew a circle in the dirt. He handed the stick to Ian. “Here, draw their layout.”

Ian crouched down as we all gathered around him.

“This is the road in, these rectangles on the left represent their two trucks,” Ian said. “Here’s where the men are standing. This is where we are.” He handed the stick back to Ostin.

Ostin looked at the diagram for a moment, then said, “All right, here’s the plan. First we move closer, to about here. . . .” He touched

the stick in the dirt. "Then we split up." He dragged the stick in a clockwise arch. "Zeus, Tessa, Ian, and Wade circle around to the right. Zeus and Tessa position themselves here, at three o'clock, Wade and Ian keep going wide, circling around to the rear of the farthest truck."

"And free Jack," Wade said.

"Exactly. At the same time, Michael, McKenna, and I will go around the opposite way. Michael positions himself at eight o'clock, here while McKenna and I free Taylor. At the signal, Zeus blasts from here, and Michael pulses from here. If any of them try to run toward the trucks, Michael gets them here. If they try to run behind the back truck, Ian and Wade can tackle them. Got it?"

"What's the signal?" I asked.

"I'll whistle," Ostin said. "That way they'll look toward me and won't know what hit them when you and Zeus strike."

"All right," I said. "Everyone ready?"

Everyone nodded.

"Let's do it."

* * *

We crept forward another twenty yards toward the clearing until Ostin signaled us to stop. We were close enough to not only see the guards but hear them arguing about how much money each of them would get. There were two men facing toward us. One of them was red in the face and shouting at a tall guard with his back to us. "We stole these trucks. We got shot at!"

The tall guard spoke with an Australian accent. "You poor wankers stole some trucks? I stole these kids from under the bloody army's nose and dragged them three hours through the whoop-whoop. You get what we agreed on or nothing. That's my final offer."

"I'll show you a final offer," the red-faced man said, reaching for his gun. The Australian guard drew first and shot him twice. Then he shot the man next to him. The other three men put their hands in the air as smoke rose up from the campsite.

When the ringing of the gun had settled, the Australian said, "Bloody crook. Anyone else have a problem with this?"

One of the three quickly replied, "You did what you had to do. It just means more for the rest of us."

"It means more for me," the Australian said. "I did the dirty work, you get what we agreed on." He brandished his pistol. "Or don't you agree?"

"No worries," the man said.

The Australian laughed as he returned his pistol to its holster. "No worries, mate."

I counted the guards. Two down, four left. "I thought you saw seven," I said to Ian.

"I must have counted wrong," he said.

"Let's move," I said.

Ostin grabbed McKenna's hand and we moved to the left while everyone else moved right. I stopped at the designated place while Ostin and McKenna moved past me to the truck Taylor was in. Ostin whistled. The men all looked back.

"What was that?" the Australian asked.

One of them shouted, "Over there by the—"

A lightning bolt stopped him. Then a second flash knocked over the tall guard. Two guards ran toward our position. I reached out and pulsed, knocking them both backward and unconscious. Zeus and Tessa emerged from the trees.

"They're out," Zeus said. "I'm surprised they're still alive. With Tessa around I don't know my own strength."

"Let's handcuff them," I said.

"Why don't we just electrocute them and be done with them?" Tessa said.

I looked at her. "We don't do it that way," I said. "Unless we have to."

"They do," she said.

"We're not them," I said. I knelt over the men I'd shocked. One was on his back, and I rolled him over onto his stomach and handcuffed him, then I did the same to the other, while Zeus and Tessa handcuffed the other two. As I was undoing their utility belts I heard someone say, "What does a girl need to do around here to get some attention?"

I looked up. Taylor was walking toward me.

"Taylor!" I ran to her. We hugged, then she pressed her lips against mine. When we parted, her eyes were locked on mine. "You have no idea how good it is to see you," she said. "I wondered if I would ever see you again."

"You didn't think I would come for you?"

"I knew you'd try," she said. "But there're five thousand of them and only one of you."

"Yeah, the odds were a little off," I said.

"For them," she said. Then she laughed, which was beautiful to hear.

"What happened here?" I asked, touching the cut on her forehead.

She shrugged. "Car accident," she said. We kissed again.

"Hey," Zeus said. "Get a room."

Taylor looked over at him and smiled. "I'm glad to see you in one piece."

Zeus grinned. "That makes two of us."

Tessa just stared at Taylor with a confused expression. "What is Tara doing here?"

"She's not Tara," Zeus said.

"This is Taylor," I said. "Number seventeen."

Tessa still looked confused. "But you look just like Tara."

"They're twins, bagel head," Zeus said.

"Twins? You must be identical," Tessa said.

"Only on the outside," Ian said, walking up to us.

Taylor looked at Ian and hugged him. "Thank you for coming after us."

"No woman left behind," he said.

"Where's Jack?" I asked.

"Still in the truck," Ian said. "Wade's untying him."

"He probably needs some help," McKenna said. She began walking back toward the truck. Suddenly we heard Jack shout, followed by a gunshot.

"What was that?" I said.

"Look out!" Tessa shouted. An Elgen guard came around the side of the truck pointing his gun at us. Zeus fired full force, blowing the gun

out of his hands and knocking him back nearly twenty feet.

“Where’d he come from?” I shouted. We all ran toward the truck.

“I didn’t see him,” Ian said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t see him.”

As I came around the truck my heart stopped.

“Oh no,” Abigail said.

Jack was kneeling on the ground holding Wade in his arms. There was blood everywhere.



As we got to Jack's side, he was pressing down on Wade's abdomen. Blood was rising up between his fingers. Wade was shaking and his skin was pale and waxlike.

"You're going to be okay, buddy," Jack said, his voice trembling. He looked up at us. "Someone help me stop the bleeding."

"It hurts . . .," Wade said. His voice was slurred.

"You're a warrior," Jack said. "Remember you're a warrior."

"It hurts. . . ."

Abigail fell to her knees next to Wade and touched his leg. Even though he was still shaking, his face relaxed. "Thank you," he said softly.

"I can cauterize it," McKenna said. "Ian, tell me where the injury is."

Ian didn't answer.

Pulling Ian back, I whispered, "How bad is it?"

Ian shook his head, then said just loud enough for me to hear, "His body is filling with blood."

Wade's entire body shook. "I don't think . . ."

"Stay with me, buddy," Jack said frantically. "You're a warrior."

"I don't think . . ." His chin quivered.

“Are you a warrior or wimp?!” Jack said, tears streaming down his cheeks. “Warrior or wimp?!”

Wade looked up at him. “You’re . . . the only friend I’ve ever had. Thank you for being . . .”

Jack’s eyes filled with new tears. “Don’t leave me, buddy. Please. Wade . . .”

Wade trembled. “I . . .” He swallowed, then mumbled, “I . . . I’m . . . sorry.” Then he went silent. His head fell back.

“No!” Jack shouted. He began pressing on Wade’s chest, but it did nothing but force more blood out of his wound.

“Start his heart!” Jack said to me. “Michael, shock him. Please.”

I didn’t move. I knew it wouldn’t help.

“Please.”

“All right,” I said. I knelt down. “You need to let go of him.”

“No,” he said.

I shocked him. Jack shouted out with pain, and Wade’s whole body jerked but nothing happened.

“Nothing,” Ian said.

“Again, Michael!” Jack said.

I looked at him. “Jack . . .”

“Please.”

“All right.” I jolted him again.

Again Jack shouted.

I looked at Ian and he shook his head.

“Again!” Jack pled. “Please, try again.”

“Jack,” I said. “He’s gone.”

“No. He can’t be.”

I put my hand on Jack’s back. “I’m sorry. But he’s gone.”

Jack wrapped his arms around Wade’s head. “No,” he sobbed. “No, no, no.”

We all looked at him, fighting our own emotions.

“It’s my fault,” Jack said.

“No, it’s not,” I said. “It’s not your fault.”

“I made him come here,” Jack said. “I made him. I’ve killed my best friend.”



Time seemed frozen, disjointed like broken sequences cut out of a horror movie. Jack's hands and torso were drenched in blood and he was screaming in anguish. All of us were crying, even Tessa, who didn't know either of them. During it all one of the guards woke and began shouting at us to let him go. The emotion of the moment piqued my anger. "Shut up!" I shouted.

"Let me out of this!" he shouted back.

I stood and walked to him. When he saw the fierce anger on my face his own expression turned from anger to fear. I had to control myself so that I only shocked him unconscious. Then Zeus and I dragged him out of the clearing into the jungle, crammed leaves into his mouth, and tied his shirt around his face to keep him from making any more noise. We were doing it for his benefit. In Jack's current state he would gladly silence him permanently. Then Zeus, Ian, and I dragged the other guards into the jungle, including the two who had been shot. There was no need to tie up the guard who had shot Wade. He hadn't survived Zeus's blast.

Abigail found a wool blanket in one of the trucks, and she and McKenna draped it over Wade's body. It was nearly an hour before

Jack finally left Wade's side. He sat alone at the edge of the clearing, softly crying.

Grief is a powerful force that settles in the heart like a dark, heavy fog. It was familiar territory to me. I was eight years old when I lost my father.

Everyone wandered off to their own place. Ian was in a daze, muttering that he should have seen the guard, and he walked off alone. Abigail, Tessa, and Zeus sat together outside the clearing, near the spot we had first entered. McKenna and Ostin went for a walk while Taylor and I sought refuge in the front seat of the red truck. I just held her in silence. So much had happened since we'd separated, but neither of us felt like talking about it. The gladness we felt at being together again was muted by shock and grief.

An hour or so later Ostin walked up to us alone. He opened the back door of the cab and climbed in. His eyes were as swollen as ours. "I can't believe this," he said. "I can't believe Wade's gone." He looked at me anxiously. "Is your mom safe?"

"She got out," I said. "She's with the voice."

"I wish we were," Taylor said softly. "What are we going to do now?"

I looked through the windshield at Jack, then back at Taylor. "We've got to get out of here before someone finds us."

"And go where?" Ostin asked.

"Jaime gave me the name of a hostel in Cuzco. We'll drive there."

"Jaime?" Taylor said. "You mean the guy who took us up the river?"

I nodded.

"How did you find him?" Ostin asked.

"He found me," I said. "Do you remember that tribesman we saw on the way in?"

Ostin nodded. "The Amacarra."

"They saved me from the Elgen. Then they brought Tessa and me to Jaime."

Taylor said, "Who is Tessa?"

"Tessa was one of Hatch's kids until she escaped from the Starxource plant six months ago. The Amacarra were hiding her. When the Peruvian army started moving in, the tribe took us up the

river to Jaime. We hiked through the jungle until we found a place to stop the convoy.”

“How did you know where we were?” Ostin asked.

“The voice,” I said.

“You talked to the voice?” he asked.

“Jaime had a radio.” I raked my hand back through my hair. “Things aren’t going well. Hatch has taken control of the Elgen. The voice wanted me to rescue you, then go to Lima and sink the Elgen boats.”

“What boats?” Taylor asked.

“The Elgen run their empire from a fleet of boats. Hatch has gathered the fleet and is taking them to an island where he plans to build a base where they can create weapons of mass destruction.”

“This just keeps getting better,” Taylor said.

“At least we’re still alive,” Ostin said.

Taylor looked at him as the pain of his words surfaced. “Not all of us.”

Ostin winced.

“I just want to get out of this stupid place,” Taylor said. “The Peruvians think we’re terrorists and want to publicly hang us.” She breathed out slowly. “I just want to go back to my old life. But it doesn’t exist anymore, does it?”

I shook my head. “Not the way it was. Until we stop Hatch, he’ll just keep coming.”

“Ignorance was bliss,” she said.

Just then McKenna walked up to us. Ostin opened his door, then slid over so McKenna could sit next to him. He took her hand, which surprised me. Outside of his mother, I had never seen Ostin even touch a girl. Clearly a lot had happened since we’d been separated at the Starxource plant.

Taylor said, “So if we sink this boat, then what?”

“We’ll go back to America,” I said.

“What boat are you talking about?” McKenna asked.

“The Elgen boat,” Ostin said.

“The *Ampere*?” she said.

I looked at her. “You know about the *Ampere*?”

“I’ve been on it. It was a long time ago. Before Hatch locked us up.”

“Hatch is bringing the entire Elgen fleet to Peru. The voice wants us to sink the *Ampere*.”

“How do you sink a huge boat?” McKenna asked. “The *Ampere* is . . . huge.”

“I could come up with a dozen ways,” Ostin said. “At least.”

“How would we even get there?” Taylor asked. “You know the army will be watching the roads out of here. They’ll probably have roadblocks.”

“Maybe not this one,” I said, looking at the dirt road. “It wasn’t on the map.”

“It’s probably just an old logging road,” Ostin said. “They might not even know about it.”

“Those Elgen guards felt safe enough on it to use it,” Taylor said. “Do you think it goes all the way to Cuzco?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But you’re right, we can’t go back to Puerto Maldonado. I say we follow it as far as it goes, then hike the rest of the way out of the jungle. At least we’ll bypass any roadblocks.”

Taylor’s voice fell. “What do we do about Wade? We can’t leave him here.”

“We’ll take him to Cuzco and give him a proper burial.”

“Even if we have to carry him?” she asked.

“I don’t think Jack would leave him,” I said. “But it’s up to him.”

Everyone went quiet. Finally I turned to McKenna. “How’s Ian doing?”

“Not well,” she said. “He’s blaming himself for not seeing the guy.”

“He can’t see everything,” Taylor said.

“He *can*,” Ostin said. “He just didn’t.”

“That’s not helpful,” Taylor said. “Don’t you dare say that around him. He feels bad enough.”

“I’m not dumb,” Ostin said.

“So what do we do once we’re in Cuzco?” McKenna asked.

“We’ll meet up with Jaime and make our plan,” I said.

“Another plan,” Taylor said. “I’m sick of plans. Someday I want someone to say ‘We’re going shopping.’”

“If only,” I said.

Taylor laid her head against my shoulder. I pulled her into me. Everyone just fell silent.

* * *

A few minutes later Abigail and Zeus walked up to us. Zeus opened the truck door. "What's going on?" he asked.

"We were just talking about our next step," Ostin said.

"Which is getting out of this lame country," Abigail said.

"We need to go to Lima and sink the Elgen's main boat," I said.

"What?" Abigail said.

"You're planning to sink the *Ampere*?" Zeus said.

"That's the plan," I said.

"It's not my plan," Zeus said, shaking his head. "Maybe you've forgotten, but I don't do boats. I'm getting out of this death hole."

"The thing is," Abigail said, "it's not just the army who wants to kill us, it's the entire country. They've probably put our pictures on television."

"No television," Ostin said. "There's no electricity."

"Whatever," Abigail said. "Then in the newspaper. And if you haven't noticed, we don't look like Peruvians. We stand out."

"She's right," Taylor said.

"Why do you think the *Ampere* will be in Lima?" Zeus asked. "It's in Europe."

"The voice," I replied. "He told us that Hatch is bringing the Elgen fleet to Peru."

Zeus shook his head. "I doubt it. Chairman Schema would never go for it. He likes Italy too much."

"There is no Chairman Schema anymore," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Hatch has taken over the entire corporation."

"That's not good," Zeus said.

Abigail groaned. "All the more reason to get out of this lousy country before our luck runs out."

"And then what?" Ostin said. "Wait for the Elgen to grow stronger and come find us?"

“We stand a much better chance of not being found if we stop throwing ourselves at them,” Abigail said.

“She’s got a point,” McKenna said. “And worst case, we’ll at least have a real life for a few years.” She frowned. “I’m sorry, but I’m tired.”

I exhaled slowly, then rested my head in my hand. “Me too.”

“We all are,” Taylor said. “And sad.”

I looked back over at Jack. Seeing him broke my heart. Taylor put her hand on my back.

“When do we leave?” Zeus asked.

“We better wait until morning,” I said. “I don’t think we should drive at night.”

“Is there anything to eat?” Ostin asked.

“There’s food and water in the back of the other truck,” McKenna said. “It looks like these guys were planning on sticking around.”

Taylor said, “We’ll get dinner for everyone.” She turned to McKenna. “Will you help me heat it?”

“Sure.” They both got out of the truck.

“I’ll help,” Ostin said, climbing down after McKenna.

Taylor leaned in and kissed my cheek. “I’ll see you in a minute.” The three of them left.

When they were gone, Abigail sighed. “I’m really worried about Jack.”

I looked back over at him again. He was still in the same place, his head bowed. “We probably shouldn’t leave him alone,” I said.

“He said he wants to be alone,” Zeus said.

“That doesn’t mean he should be,” Abigail replied. She took Zeus’s hand. “Let’s go see him.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said.

The three of us walked over to where Jack was sitting and sat down next to him. He glanced up at us, then looked back down. I had no idea what to say.

Fortunately, Abigail was naturally gifted at comforting people. She put her hand on Jack’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I can’t take away the kind of pain you’re feeling.”

“I need to feel the pain,” Jack said. “It would be wrong not to.” We were all silent for a moment.

Abigail said, “You know, when we couldn’t find you, Wade was so upset. He kept saying, ‘We’ve got to find Jack.’ He pushed us along. You meant that much to him.”

Jack covered his eyes with his hand. None of us had ever seen him cry before. It looked so foreign, like Superman with a broken arm. After a minute he looked up at us. “Wade had no one. His parents abandoned him. Every foster home he went to threw him out. His grandmother was . . . a loser.” He put down his head.

“He had you,” Abigail said.

“Lucky him,” Jack replied sarcastically.

“He *was* lucky to have you,” Abigail said.

Jack exploded. “Lucky? He’d still be alive if it wasn’t for me.”

Abigail didn’t turn away. After a moment she said, “When your home was burned down, you said, ‘I made my choices, I’ll live with them.’ Shouldn’t you allow Wade the same? No one forced him to come. He made his choices.”

Jack didn’t answer.

Abigail took his hand. “Everyone dies. You made Wade’s life worth living.”

Jack bowed his head again. Abigail wrapped her arms around him and held him. He began to shake.

A minute later Zeus said, “I’m sorry, man. Wade was a good guy. He really loved you.”

Without looking up Jack said, “I was a jerk to him. I was always on his case.”

“He knew you loved him. That’s why he loved you so much,” Abigail said.

All of us sat quietly for a moment, then Zeus added, “So do we.” Zeus stood up and walked away.

After another minute I said, “He’s right, you know.”

Jack couldn’t answer. He just broke down and wept.



That night we ate a hot dinner of pork-and-bean burritos and some kind of soup with chicken claws in it. Everyone ate except for Jack and Ian, who claimed not to be hungry. A while after dinner Jack and I put Wade's wrapped body in the back of the blue truck to keep it from animals, then we all found a place to sleep in the other truck bed, or inside the trucks, except for Jack, who slept outside on the ground.

The next morning I woke to the sound of digging. Jack had found a shovel in the truck and was digging a grave. I walked over to him. He had washed the blood off his face and arms, but his shirt was stained. He was soaked in sweat and he looked as if he hadn't slept at all.

"Need any help?"

He shook his head.

"You don't want to take him with us?"

"It doesn't matter where he's buried. No one in America cares."

I just looked down. After a few minutes I said, "We were planning on leaving around noon. We're going to take the trucks and drive to Cuzco." I looked at Jack, then said, "After we have a service for Wade."

He looked up, then said, "Would you say something? I don't know how to. He respected you."

“I’d be honored,” I said.

* * *

Shortly after Jack finished digging, Zeus and Jack laid Wade’s wrapped body in the grave, and we all gathered around. McKenna and Ostin had fashioned a small cross from tree branches, and Abigail and Taylor had gathered dozens of brightly colored jungle flowers, enough to completely cover the grave. I stood at the head of the grave next to the cross. It seemed as if even the jungle had quieted for my eulogy.

“To be honest, when I first met Wade I didn’t like him very much. I only knew him as a bully. In school, there’s a lot said about bullies. We hear about what bad people they are. Adults act as if bullying only takes place in school. But adults bully one another all the time. Some married people bully each other. Some bosses bully their employees. Businesses bully businesses. Countries bully countries. It’s like the no-bullying rule changes after you’re an adult.

“Still, they tell us to hate bullies. But maybe that’s the exact opposite of what we should do. Maybe if they were treated well, they wouldn’t bully. Wade wasn’t born a bully; he was taught it by those who should have taken care of him.

“After he became my friend, he showed me what kind of person he really was. He was loyal and brave. He had the chance to go home and the Elgen probably would have left him alone, but he wouldn’t do it. He wouldn’t leave his friends. And that makes him a hero. I know we’re all going to miss him. I’m going to miss him. But most of all, Jack will miss him.”

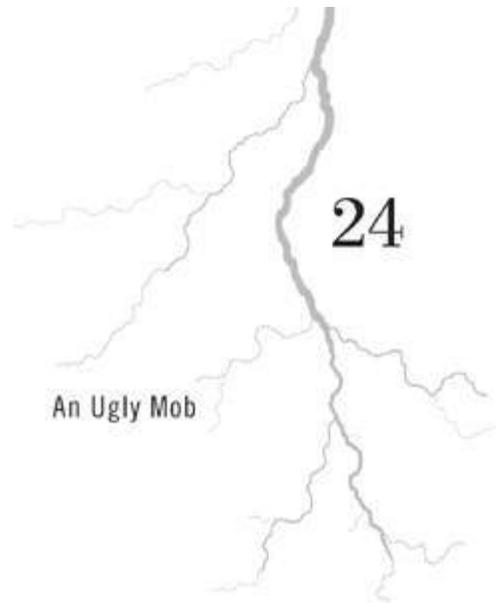
I looked at Jack. His face was streaked with tears.

“Wade’s last words were to Jack. He thanked him for being his friend. His only friend. Then he said he was sorry. But Wade had nothing to be sorry about. He showed his true self. He always wanted to be a warrior like Jack. And in the end, he was.” I took a deep breath. “That’s all I have to say.”

Taylor sidled up to me and took my hand.

“Thank you,” Jack said.

Everyone stood around quietly to see what Jack would do. He looked down for a moment, then he saluted. After a few more minutes Zeus began shoveling the dirt back into the grave. When he was done, Taylor, McKenna, and Abigail covered the mound with flowers.



Zeus, Taylor, Ian, and I checked the guards to make sure they were secure. Their leader, the guard who had carried Jack and Taylor into the jungle, tried to negotiate with us.

“Come on, mates. We can work somethin’ out.”

“We’ve seen how you work things out,” I said.

“I can get you money.”

Zeus crouched down next to him. “How? By selling one of us? Do you think we’re stupid?”

The man said nothing.

Zeus’s eyes narrowed. “I remember you. You were at the academy.”

“I was at the gate,” he said. “I used to protect you. All of you.”

Zeus grinned. “You protected me?” He laughed. “Delusions of grandeur.”

The man turned away from him.

“Look at me!” Zeus grabbed him by the hair and pulled his head back. “Your friend killed one of our friends.”

“He was acting on his own.”

“He wouldn’t have been here if it wasn’t for you.” Zeus held his hands up and electricity sparked between his fingers. “The only reason

I don't electrocute you right now is because Michael asked me not to. But give me a reason to change my mind."

The man went silent.

"Where's your money?" I asked.

"It's in his back pocket," Ian said.

Zeus rolled him over and took out his wallet. "Here," he said, tossing it to Ian.

"How much is there?" I asked.

Ian rifled through the bills. "About a thousand in Peruvian."

I crouched down next to the man. "Does this road go all the way to Cuzco?"

He didn't answer me.

"There's an anthill over by that tree," Ian said. "Let's drag him over there."

"The road goes to Paucartambo," he said.

"What's that?"

"It's a small village."

"Does the army know about this road?"

"They wouldn't be much of an army if they didn't."

"But you felt safe enough to hide here."

"They weren't expecting us." He turned his head to look at me. "You don't really think you can escape, do you? They've plastered your pictures on newspapers and handbills everywhere. The whole country is looking for you."

"Well, we'll just have to do our best to not let them find us," I said. "Come on, guys."

"Wait. You're not just going to leave me here like this. . . ."

"No," I said. "Ian, add another pair of handcuffs. And if he gives you any trouble"—I looked at the guard—"leave him on the anthill."

* * *

We checked the other three guards for money, then added handcuffs as well. We ended up with more than two thousand seven hundred soles, which Ostin said was more than a thousand dollars. A half hour

later I approached Jack, who was sitting on the ground next to Wade's grave.

"We're ready."

He stood. He was no longer crying. His emotions had turned. His face was steely with anger.

I handed him the truck keys. "We're in the blue truck. The guard told us that the road goes all the way through the jungle. We can make it to Cuzco by night."

He nodded, then walked past me to the truck.

Taylor, Ostin, McKenna, and I rode in the truck with Jack, while Zeus, Tessa, Abigail, and Ian rode in the other.

The dirt road continued on for ten miles, opening to an abandoned logging site, then carried on west for another forty miles until, by late afternoon, we emerged from the jungle into Paucartambo, a village nestled between the green slopes of two mountains.

The ancient-looking town was bigger than I thought it would be. The buildings had weathered plaster exteriors with terra-cotta tile roofs and the streets were crowded with people on foot, many dressed in bright Quechuan costumes with ponchos and bowler hats.

As we entered the town, a herd of llamas crossing the main street stopped us.

"Llamas are so funny looking," Taylor said.

"Technically," Ostin said, "they are vicuñas."

"They look like llamas to me," Taylor said.

"'Llama' refers to the whole family of domesticated South American cameloids," Ostin said. "Like we call horses, horses, but they might be quarter horses or Clydesdales or any other kind. Vicuñas are smaller than most other llamas and their fur is more valued than even the alpaca. It's illegal to try to export them."

"I wasn't planning on bringing one home," Taylor said.

"You know, llamas are descended from the camel."

"How did camels get to South America?" McKenna asked.

"I'm glad you asked," Ostin said.

"I'm not," Taylor mumbled.

I lay my head against the window and looked out. I was glad to hear Ostin spouting off again. I wanted to think about anything

except Wade. Somehow, Ostin's biology lesson made things seem normal even though they weren't and never would be again.

After the herd had passed we drove slowly around the town.

"Look," Taylor said. "A street market. Can we stop?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

"Maybe they have something to eat," Ostin said. "I'm hungry."

"Me too," McKenna said. "And thirsty. Can we stop and get some water?"

"I have to use the bathroom," Taylor said.

"They don't have toilets," Ostin said. "Just squatters."

"What's a squatter?" she asked.

"It's just a hole in the ground. And they probably won't have toilet paper."

"Lovely," Taylor said. "I should have gone in the jungle with McKenna."

"All right," I said, pointing to a dirt field at the end of the road. "Let's park over there."

Jack pulled off the road into the vacant lot and put the truck in park. Zeus pulled the other truck up to my side and rolled down his window. "What are we doing?" Zeus asked.

"We're stopping to get something to eat," I said.

He looked back, then said, "All right."

Ostin and I opened the doors, and everyone climbed out except for Jack. Zeus parked the other truck in front of us, and everyone else got out.

The place made me nervous. "We better not stay too long," I said.

Abigail walked up to Jack. "Are you coming?"

"No. I'll wait here."

"Can I get you anything?"

He shook his head. "No."

Abigail touched his arm. "I'll see if I can find some pastries or something."

The street market was swarming with people and our presence did not go unnoticed. We were the only foreigners on the street, and the natives were not shy about staring at us, which made me very nervous. I held Taylor's hand as we walked through the square.

“I wish Idaho had street markets,” she said. She stopped to look at a colorful poncho, holding it up to her chest. “How do I look?”

“Native,” I said.

There was a small mart with a refrigerator near the door. “Hey, they’ve got Inca Kola,” I said “Want one?”

“Sure. Maybe they have a bathroom inside,” Taylor replied.

The mart was narrow, no more than ten feet wide but three times as long. Colorful packages of snacks with Spanish writing hung on the walls. I lay our things on one of the small wood tables against the wall.

“I don’t see a bathroom,” I said. “I wish Ostin was here to translate for us.”

“Wait, I remember the word for bathroom.” She walked up to the dark-featured man at the counter. “Excuse me. Do you have a *baño*?”

I doubted he understood anything but the last word, but he pointed toward the back of the store. “*El baño, sí.*”

“Two years of high school Spanish just paid off,” Taylor said, looking back at me. “See you in a second.”

While she was gone, I bought two colas and some bottled water, and brought them over to the table. The table was dirty, but there were napkins so I wet one with a bottle of water and wiped it off. Taylor returned about five minutes later.

“That was gross,” she said. “There were flies everywhere.” She sat down and I handed her a bottle of cola.

“It’s warm,” I said.

She frowned. “Don’t they have a refrigerator?”

“Yeah. Just no power.”

“Why don’t they have electricity?”

I cocked my head. “I think that’s our fault.”

“Oh, right.”

I took a swig of my tepid soda. “So when did this thing with Ostin and McKenna start?”

“I think it began back in Idaho,” she said. “When McKenna melted through her bands in the truck? Ostin was all goo-goo eyed.”

“He did always have a thing for Asian girls. Remember that night at Maddie’s party when he just stared at Angel until she freaked?”

“Yeah. Then he told her she was the most beautiful girl in the world.” Taylor nodded. “Maybe he’s not as dumb with girls as we thought.” She took a drink of her cola. “Actually, I think it really started after we lost you in the Starxource plant. I freaked out and blamed Ostin for leaving you behind. I said some pretty mean things. McKenna stood up for him.”

Just then two soldiers in camouflage ran past the grocery store.

“Did you see that?” I said.

Taylor turned back. “What?”

“Soldiers just ran by. We’ve got to go.”

“We’ve got to find the others,” Taylor said.

We left our drinks and walked to the door. I looked for more soldiers but didn’t see any. Across the street from us I could see Abigail, Zeus, and Tessa trying on hats. We hurried over to them.

Tessa looked up at me from under the brim of a straw hat. “What’s up?”

“Soldiers,” Taylor said.

“Where?” Zeus asked.

“Two just ran past us,” I said. “That way.”

“Toward the trucks,” Zeus said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Where’s everyone else?” I asked.

“The last time I saw Ostin and McKenna they were at that table over there,” Abigail said. “By that fruit cart. They were buying ponchos.”

“And Ian?”

“He decided to hang back with Jack,” Tessa said.

“You guys head back,” I said. “Taylor and I will find Ostin and McKenna.”

While they walked back up the road, Taylor and I headed back toward the fruit cart.

“There they are,” Taylor said, pointing. “At that puppet show.”

We ran down to them. They were both carrying bags with colorful ponchos and hats.

I grabbed Ostin’s arm. “We’ve got to go.”

“Wait,” Ostin said. “It’s just about over.”

“Now!” Taylor said. “We just saw soldiers.”

As we hurried back up the street toward the trucks, we noticed a large crowd had gathered near the end of the market adjacent to the field where we had parked the trucks.

Suddenly, Ostin grabbed McKenna's arm and pulled her into a small bakery. He shouted to us, "Guys!" He frantically motioned for us to follow.

"What?" I said, walking into the bakery.

"That's not a crowd, it's a mob. I heard someone shout 'Death to the American terrorists.'"

Just then the baker behind the counter pointed at us, "*Terroristas!*"

Taylor rebooted him. The man put his hand up to his forehead. He looked confused and lost. He spotted us and said, "*A la orden, amigos?*"

"*Pastel de canela, por favor,*" Ostin said, pointing to a pastry. "*Eso.*"

"*Muy bien,*" he said, lifting out a bun sprinkled with cinnamon. "*Hablas muy bien el español. Un sol, porfa.*"

Ostin handed him a coin.

"How can you think about eating?" Taylor asked.

"It's a distraction," Ostin said.

"For him or for you?" Taylor said.

"Ask him if there's a back way out," I said.

"*Hay una salida atrás?*" Ostin asked.

"*Sí. A través aquí.*"

"*Gracias,*" Ostin said. He turned to us. "There is."

"Let's go."

The back door opened out into an unpaved alley. Fortunately there was no one there except a beggar who had fallen asleep against a stucco wall.

"This way," I said.

As we got to the top of the passage our hearts froze. "You gotta be kidding me," Ostin said.

In the dirt field there were two army jeeps with mounted machine guns, a large transport truck, a police car, and a crowd of Peruvians who had surrounded the vehicles. Jack and Ian were nowhere to be seen.

"Do you think they caught them?" McKenna asked.

“I’m betting that Ian saw them coming and they ran.”

“What do we do now?” Taylor asked. “They’ve surrounded the trucks.”

“They’re no good to us now anyway,” I said. “We’ve been identified. Everyone will be looking for them.”

“Then how do we get out of here?”

“Look over there,” McKenna said.

To the south of the lot was a crowd of several hundred Peruvians. They had surrounded Zeus, Tessa, and Abigail.

“This is bad,” I said.

“This is going to be ugly,” Ostin said. “It’s a freakin’ lynch mob.”

“Except with Tessa next to him, Zeus could easily kill them all,” I said.

“That’s all we need,” Taylor said. “A massacre by the American terrorists.”

“I have an idea,” I said. “Ostin, we need your ponchos.”

He handed over the sacks. I gave one of the ponchos to Taylor. “If we can get close enough to them, Taylor could reboot the whole crowd.”

“I can’t reboot that many people,” she said.

“You can with Tessa’s help,” I said. “That’s why we need to get close.” I pulled the hat on, lowering its brim to conceal my face. “How do I look?”

“Native,” Taylor said, putting on her own hat.

I turned to Ostin. “We need a diversion. Blow something up. Just not the big army truck.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s what we’re taking out of here.”

“Got it,” McKenna said.

Taylor took a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

Taylor and I shoved our way through the jeering crowd with our heads down as she rebooted everyone in our way. One man grabbed my arm, but I immediately pulsed and kept walking. When we got near the center, we saw rocks and fruit around Zeus and the girls. Zeus was bleeding and three Peruvians were lying facedown on the ground. There were machetes on the ground near two of them.

The girls stood behind Zeus, who had his hands up, electricity sparking between them. The people didn't dare get any closer, so they had resorted to throwing things at them. Near the front, a man cocked his arm back to throw a brick. I shocked him, dropping him to the ground. I walked into the clearing with Taylor following behind me.

Zeus held his hands out toward us. "Stop!"

I kept walking.

"I said stop!"

Then he fired at me, which is what I wanted. The electricity filled my body with even more strength, something we'd need if Taylor couldn't reboot them all.

When I didn't fall, Zeus looked panicked. When I was ten feet from him I tilted my hat up. "Need some help?"

He groaned with relief. "Michael."

"Tessa, enhance Taylor."

"Got it," Tessa said.

I looked at Taylor. "Now."

Taylor took off her hat and concentrated. Suddenly the entire crowd silenced. A few of the older people collapsed to the ground.

"Wow," Taylor said. "I've never done that before."

"Hurry, let's get out of here," I said. We walked in a single-file line with me in front, Zeus taking the back, and Tessa in the middle to enhance all of us. "Have you seen Jack and Ian?" I asked.

"No," Abigail said. "I'm hoping Ian's seen us."

Suddenly there was a loud explosion near the market and black smoke began to rise above the buildings. As I had hoped, it drew the crowd's attention away from the field.

"What was that?" Zeus asked.

"McKenna and Ostin," I said. "Tessa, stay close to Taylor. Keep rebooting."

We might as well have been invisible as we walked through the crowd. The townspeople just stood around us in a stupor, looking like they all had migraines. After the supercharge I got from Zeus, I was feeling pretty electric, and people's metal objects kept sticking to me, which I had to pluck off.

“You’ve got a machete stuck to your back,” Tessa said, pulling the knife off of me. “And three earrings.”

As we got near the army truck, Taylor rebooted the crowd standing around it. Then I walked to the driver’s side of the truck and pulsed, knocking out the driver and passenger. Zeus and I pulled them out.

“I’ll drive,” Zeus said.

“There’s Jack and Ian,” McKenna said, pointing toward the east. “They’re running toward us.”

Jack and Ian were at the far side of the field, running at a dead sprint in our direction.

“They’re being chased by soldiers,” Abigail said.

There were at least a dozen soldiers behind them. Then one of them dropped to his knee and raised a gun.

“Zeus!” I shouted.

“I see it!” Zeus said. He reached out and fired a wide bolt, dropping the entire group like bowling pins.

I began waving toward Ian and Jack, which was moot since Ian had already seen us. They reached us seconds later, panting and out of breath. “Thanks for the assist,” Jack said to Zeus.

“Always my pleasure,” Zeus said. “Get in back.”

Zeus and I jumped in the front seat, and Zeus started up the truck.

Taylor, Abigail, and Tessa had already climbed into the back of the transport, and Taylor waved to Jack and Ian.

I parted the screen that divided the cab from the back. “Ian, where are Ostin and McKenna?”

He looked around for a moment. “They’re over there,” he said, pointing.

“Where?” I asked.

“Wait for it.”

Just then Ostin and McKenna came running out of the bakery and back up the alley. “Zeus, they’re over there,” I said. “Let’s get them.”

“Got it,” he said. He shoved the stick shift forward, and the truck sluggishly ground into gear, then lurched forward. “This thing’s a whale,” he said.

He turned the truck around as tightly as he could, then drove through a ditch, which tumbled everyone in back, and into the road. I

hung out the passenger window, waving Ostin's poncho to get their attention. McKenna saw us first.

"Get in back!" I shouted to them.

Zeus stopped the truck, and Jack and Ian pulled them in. Taylor pounded on the metal side of the truck to signal us. "They're in! Go!"

"Which way?" Zeus asked.

"That way," I said, pointing to the town's only stoplight. "Take the highway east to Cuzco."

We drove around the outside of the town, onto the highway. I kept waiting for someone to come after us, but no one did. As the town fell out of sight, Taylor stuck her head up into the cab.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Never been better," I said.

"Good," she said, nodding. "Cute little town."

* * *

The one good thing about our brush with danger and narrow escape (other than that we *did* escape) was that it temporarily took our minds from the grief we were all carrying—though I'm not sure if trading fear for pain is such a bargain.

From Paucartambo we drove to the ancient Incan hill town of Pisac, but for obvious reasons, we didn't stop. From Pisac it was only thirty-five more miles to Cuzco, which was a pretty straight drive except that the bridge over the Urubamba River was washed out and the temporary bridge allowed only one lane of traffic, so we had to wait a long time to cross.

Taylor climbed up front with Zeus and me while everyone else sat or slept in the back. No one got too comfortable. We were driving a stolen army truck and we figured that it was only a matter of time before someone noticed. Ian sat looking back to keep watch. We passed several army vehicles going the opposite direction, but they didn't even acknowledge us. We reached the outskirts of Cuzco after dark.



The city of Cuzco is the kind of place you see in travel magazines and on TV travel shows. Of course Ostin had to tell us all he knew about the city.

“Cuzco is not only the ancient capital of the Incan empire, but it’s the official tourist city of Peru—and it attracts more than two million visitors a year. The original city was built in the shape of a puma, or mountain lion, which, to the Incans, was a sacred animal.

“When the Spanish explorer Pizarro arrived in Peru with his soldiers, the Incan king Atahualpa tried to run him out, but the king was captured by the Spanish conquistadors. For his release, Pizarro demanded that the Incans fill a large room with gold. The Incans paid the ransom, but Pizarro just took their gold, then executed the king anyway. That’s where the saying ‘a king’s ransom’ came from.

“The Inca Atahualpa was the last great Incan emperor, and forty years after his death the great Incan empire came to an end. The Spanish tore down the Incan palace and built a cathedral on top of it.”

Ostin’s Cuzco trivia went on for about twenty minutes. With the exception of McKenna’s occasional response, no one else said a thing and eventually even Ostin got tired of hearing himself.

As we drove toward the city, Ian and Taylor changed places and Ian became our GPS, guiding us to the town square, the Plaza de Armas. As Ostin had said, Cuzco was a major tourist attraction and the traffic slowed as the area was crowded with tourists and the people who profit from them.

Zeus parked the army truck behind the cathedral of Santo Domingo, and we all got out, looking around in awe. The cobblestone-paved square was large and beautifully decorated in the architecture of the Spanish Renaissance. Outside of history books I had never seen anything like it.

It seemed to me that everyone was looking at us, which made me nervous, but wasn't surprising. We hadn't bathed in weeks and our clothes were ridiculously dirty. Only Jack, whose clothes were stained with blood, had changed shirts and was wearing an Elgen guard's undershirt.

We split up into smaller groups to avoid drawing any more attention to ourselves, arranging to meet in one hour at the large fountain in the center of the plaza. Then Taylor, Ostin, McKenna, and I set out in search of Hostel El Triunfo.

Finding the place wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. All Jaime had told us about the hostel's location was that it was near the town square. The square was considerably larger than I had imagined and there were dozens of side streets and tiny alleyways leading off of it.

Finally, Ostin asked a shopkeeper where we could find the place and he pointed us in the general direction. Taylor and I started off for it while Ostin and McKenna fell back, following us at a distance.

* * *

The hostel wasn't especially notable, and Taylor and I walked past it twice before she spotted a small, plastic sign hanging near the hostel's splintered wood front door. We stepped inside, quickly shutting the door behind us.

The tiny lobby was dark and austere, lit only with candles. At the back of the room, standing behind a small counter, was an old Peruvian man with silver hair and bushy gray eyebrows as thick as

caterpillars. Next to him was a young woman dressed in modern clothing. She looked close to our age, perhaps just a year or two older. The man looked at us suspiciously.

I walked up to the counter. "Do you speak English?" I asked.

"Sí, señor. Un poco."

"We would like a room for the night."

The man's dark eyes darted back and forth nervously. "I am sorry, but we have no room. It is the tourist season."

Taylor glanced at me.

"I'm a friend of Jaime," I whispered.

The young woman glanced at the man. The man said, "Who?"

"Jaime," I repeated.

He just looked at me. I suddenly wondered if we had come to the wrong place. "Is this Hostel El Triunfo?"

"Sí."

"You don't know Jaime?"

The man laughed. "I have many amigos named Jaime. What is his last name?"

I didn't know Jaime's last name. I looked at Taylor, but she shrugged. "We don't know."

"He must not be much of a friend. I am sorry, but there are other hotels nearby. Perhaps they have a vacancy."

I was speechless, unsure of what to do. The man raised his massive eyebrows, as if inviting us to leave. "Do you need anything else?"

"No," I said. "Thank you. We'll keep looking."

Taylor and I walked back out into the bustling alley. I sat down on the sidewalk and Taylor sat next to me.

"What now?" she asked.

"I still have the radio. I'll call Jaime." I froze. "No."

"What?"

"I left the radio in the truck."

"That's no big deal," she said. "It's not too far."

"No, not in this truck. It's in the pickup truck."

"Back in Paucartambo?"

I groaned. "I screwed up."

"We weren't planning on being attacked," she said.

“I was sloppy,” I said. “We should always plan on being attacked. I was supposed to destroy the radio if we were caught, and now they have it. And we have no way to contact Jaime.”

Taylor looked worried. “Without Jaime, how do we get home?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

She looked scared. “But he knows we’re here, right?”

“He said to meet him at Hostel El Triunfo. But apparently he was mistaken.”

Just then someone said, “Amigo.”

I looked up. The elderly man from the hostel was standing across the alley. He walked up to us. “You are Michael?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Excuse me, but my granddaughter talks too much. I could not risk her recognizing you. All of Peru is looking for you. Even in Cuzco, where there are many Americans, it is dangerous for you. They have put your friends’ pictures in the newspapers and on posters everywhere. You and your friends must get off the street quickly.” He handed me a brass key. “This is a key to a room in the back of the hostel. You may enter it through that door, so no one will see you.” He pointed to a blue metal door set in the white stucco wall. “You must hide in there until Jaime arrives.”

“You’ve spoken to Jaime?”

“Yesterday,” he said. “He told me to watch for you. He will be happy to know that you have made it here.”

I was relieved to hear that Jaime was safe.

“Until he comes, you and your friends must stay inside. I will bring extra blankets and pillows and some water and food.”

“I need to find my friends,” I said. I put the key in my pocket. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for what you are doing,” he said. “You are most brave.”

We walked down to where Ostin and McKenna were standing near the street corner.

“Any luck?” Ostin asked.

“We found it,” I said. “You guys go with Taylor back to the room, I’ll round up everyone else.”

“We can help,” Ostin said.

“No, they have pictures of you, but not me.”

“We’ll check out the room,” Taylor said, “then I’ll wait for everyone at the blue door.”

“See you in a minute,” I said. I handed Taylor the key, then walked back down past the hostel to the plaza, which even at the late hour was bustling with humanity. Apparently parts of Cuzco still had electricity, as light emanated from many of the shops and restaurants, and the plaza itself was flooded with golden light. A Peruvian street band was playing near the fountain, filling the air with a carnival ambience. There were tourists everywhere, laughing, buying trinkets, and drinking. Some of them were dancing. I envied them. I wanted to have fun too. Under different circumstances I would have.

I found Zeus, Ian, Tessa, and Abigail sitting on the ledge of the fountain eating ice cream. The fountain was half as wide as Mitchell’s swimming pool, with a large bowl held up by three mermen who were blowing shell horns with water coming out.

“Want some ice cream?” Tessa asked as I approached.

“I’m okay,” I said. “We found our contact. We’ve got to go.”

“I don’t want to go in yet,” Abigail said. “It’s fun out here.”

“It’s a beautiful night,” Tessa said.

“The man at the hostel said it isn’t safe for us. He said that they’ve shown your pictures in the newspaper.”

“Great, we’re famous,” Zeus said.

“Infamous,” Tessa corrected.

“It’s just like I said,” Abigail said.

Zeus stood. “Let’s go.” He turned to me. “Where’s this place?”

I gestured with my head. “Walk up that alley about a hundred feet. On your right side you’ll come to a blue metal door. Taylor will be waiting for you.”

“I see it,” Ian said. “Let’s go.”

“We escaped and I still feel like a prisoner,” Abigail said, turning away from me.

“Does anyone know where Jack is?” I asked.

“He went into the cathedral,” Ian said. “I can get him.”

“That’s okay, I will. They didn’t show my picture.”

“I’ll go with you,” Tessa said.

I hesitated. "You probably shouldn't. . . ."

"They don't have my picture either," she said firmly. "I'm just another tourist. You'll look less suspicious with me."

"All right," I said. "I'll see you guys at the room."

Zeus, Ian, and Abigail walked off, leaving Tessa and me alone.

As Tessa and I walked from the fountain, she took my hand. "We should hold hands. We'll look less like terrorists."

"All right," I said, feeling a little uncomfortable. She noticed my apprehension and let go of my hand.

She was quiet a moment, then said, "Ever since we rescued your friends you've hardly spoken to me. What's the deal, aren't we friends anymore?"

"It's not that. I've had a lot on my mind."

"You mean you have a lot of Taylor on your mind."

"She's my girlfriend."

"Does that mean we can't be friends anymore?"

I stopped. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ignore you. There's just a lot going on."

"I know," she said. "I'm not trying to bust your chops." She stopped and looked into my eyes. "It's just, we got pretty close in the jungle. I don't think we should just throw it away."

I didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

She smiled sadly at me then cocked her head toward the cathedral. "Come on, let's get Jack."

As we neared the cathedral I asked, "What's the deal with you and Zeus?"

She looked at me with a pained expression. "You really want to open that door?"

"Only if you want to talk about it."

"He was my boyfriend for, like, three years. It was great. Then when I left for Peru, I didn't hear from him once. It was like, I love you, then, who are you? I was pretty hurt."

"Have you talked to him about it?"

"I tried. He just had a lot of excuses. And now he has a thing for Abigail."

"He told you that?"

“He didn’t have to,” Tessa said. She sighed. “I’m going to have to find someone less electric.”

* * *

The cathedral of Santo Domingo was less than a hundred yards from the fountain, and the building towered above the plaza like a great stone fortress. Even though it was late, the doors to the cathedral were open and locals and groups of tourists were walking in to sightsee or worship. I had never been inside a cathedral before and I was astonished at the intricate architecture and artwork. “This is amazing,” I said.

“You should see St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City,” Tessa said. “It makes this place look like a Chuck E. Cheese’s.”

“You’re jaded,” I said.

“All of Hatch’s kids are jaded,” she replied.

Near the center of the chapel was a beautiful painting of the Last Supper. I stopped to look at it. After a moment Tessa rolled her eyes. “Come on, tourist,” she said, pulling my hand. “We’re looking for Jack, not sightseeing.”

We had practically walked through the entire cathedral before we found him. He was kneeling with his head bowed before a table of lit candles. We watched him for a few minutes until Tessa, who was growing impatient, whispered to him, “Jack.”

He looked up at us.

“Sorry to disturb you,” I said.

“It’s okay,” he said, standing.

I glanced at the table in front of him. “What are you doing?”

“I lit a candle for Wade,” he said.

“I didn’t know you were religious,” I said.

“I’m not,” he replied. He walked toward me. “Did you find the place?”

“Yes. The owner said we should get off the street. The government has shown our pictures all over the media and he’s afraid someone might recognize us.”

“I figured as much,” Jack said.

As we walked out of the cathedral I noticed five police cars were now parked on the opposite side of the square.

“Those weren’t there before,” I said.

“What do you think’s going on?” Tessa asked.

Jack lowered his head slightly. “They must have found the truck,” he said.

“If they did,” I said, “then they know we’re here.” As I looked around the square I saw police standing at every exit and alley. They were everywhere.

“What do we do?” Tessa asked.

“We act like tourists,” I said. “Jack, stay a little behind us. We’ll walk right past them.”

As we neared the alley, we could see that the police officers were all carrying pieces of paper. One of them stared at Tessa and me, then looked back down at the paper, then back up again.

“They have pictures,” Tessa said.

“I’m in trouble,” Jack said.

“Don’t run,” I said. “Not yet.”

The same officer who had dismissed us looked at Jack, then down at the paper again then back up. His expression changed. He said something to another officer. Then both officers approached Jack. They had grave expressions on their faces and their hands were on their guns.

“*Señor*, may I see your passport?” one of them said.

Then two other police officers stepped up behind him.

“I . . . I left it at the hotel,” Jack said.

The officer said something in Spanish to the other police, then said, “Please show me some I.D.”

“I don’t have my wallet,” Jack said.

The man just stared into Jack’s face. “You have no identification?”

“He got pickpocketed,” I said, turning back. “This afternoon.”

The man glanced over at me, then back at Jack. Then a fifth officer walked up to us. He was holding an Uzi machine gun. Even though I fought it, I was twitching like crazy, which I’m sure didn’t help our cause.

“Are you together?” he asked Tessa.

“Yes, sir,” she said. She moved closer to me, and I put my arm around her.

“You are Americans,” he said. I couldn’t tell if he meant it as a statement or a question.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Jack and I glanced at each other. Two of the officers moved their hands toward their guns. I was about to pulse when the officer in front of us suddenly froze. He just stood there, as if he were having a stroke or something. Then he looked up and turned to his partner and said something in Spanish that, from what I could tell, had nothing to do with us. The policeman with the Uzi turned and looked at a woman crossing the street. It was as if they had suddenly forgotten we were even there. I recognized Taylor’s work.

I gestured with my head to Jack. “Time to go,” I said. We walked away. About twenty feet from where we were stopped, Taylor and Ian stepped out from a leather goods shop, falling in a few steps behind us. “That was close,” Taylor said. She was looking at my arm around Tessa.

I quickly dropped it to my side. “They recognized Jack,” I said.

“I think they found the truck,” Jack said.

“They did,” Ian said. “I saw them from the hostel.”

Ian stepped ahead of us and pushed open the hostel’s blue door, which led into a small dark courtyard with a picnic table and umbrella. The space was walled in with a brick-and-stucco wall. The building’s surface was terra-cotta, and there were several hanging pots of red flowers. Three cats lounged on a wrought-iron table.

“It’s over here,” Ian said, stopping to wave us on. “There’s a stairway around back.”

We turned the corner and climbed a rickety, splintered wooden stairway to an upstairs room. As we climbed the stairs I reached for Taylor’s hand, but she ignored me. Jack opened the door, and we all hurried in. Ian locked the door behind us.

The room was lit by a single bare lightbulb. There was no air-conditioning, and even though it was well past sunset, the heat in the room was stifling.

The room was small for so many people. There were two bunk beds and a pile of blankets and pillows. Zeus and Abigail were sitting on one bed.

“Not exactly the Four Seasons,” Tessa said.

“Perhaps you prefer prison,” Taylor said coldly.

Tessa looked at her and frowned. “Just sayin’, sweetheart. No need to get testy.”

They glared at each other, filling the room with an uncomfortable tension. Then Taylor turned away.

I put my hand on her shoulder, and she shrugged it off. I pulled her aside. “What’s up?”

“We’re being hunted,” she said angrily.

“Yeah, I know that. What’s going on with us?”

“You tell me. You find something new in the jungle?” She turned away from me.

“Taylor . . .”

As I stood there wondering what to do, there was a knock at the door. We all froze except for Ian. “It’s the hostel man,” he said. “He’s bringing something.”

Jack opened the door.

“*Buenas noches*,” the man said, pushing his way in. He was carrying two large canvas bags. He set them down on the floor, then shut the door behind himself. “I brought you some food and water. I must warn you, the police are going door to door checking buildings,” he said. “You must not come out until I tell you it is safe. I will do what I can to keep them away. I have locked the blue door.”

“Thank you,” I said. “We’ll stay inside.”

“Good,” he said. “I must go back to the front before they arrive. One more thing. I have spoken with Jaime. He will be here early tomorrow morning to get you.” He opened the door. “I will pray to the Virgin Mary for your safety.” He walked out and Jack locked the door behind him.

The room was quiet.

“What’s the plan if they come?” Zeus asked.

“Ian will see them long before they get here,” I said. “Taylor can reboot them.” I looked at Ian. “If we have to run, what’s behind the

back fence?”

“It looks like the back of a restaurant. It leads to a bunch of other streets. I think we could lose them.”

“Can you see any vehicles?”

“There’s a parking lot two blocks up. There are a few vans big enough to carry us all.”

“Any with keys?”

“No worries,” Jack said. “I can hot-wire anything here.”

“Okay,” I said. “As a last resort we blow our way out of here, climb over the fence, then follow Ian to the parking lot. Jack hot-wires a van, and we drive to Lima.”

“What if we get separated?” Abigail asked.

“We don’t,” I said. “We stick together.” I looked around the room. The fatigue of it all was getting to everyone. “Got it?” No one spoke. “All right. Let’s try to get some rest.”

* * *

In spite of what I’d said, no one slept. Especially me. Watching Taylor fume was agonizing. An hour later Ian said, “Two policemen just checked the blue door. Now they’re going into the front door of the hostel.”

Everyone was tense.

After a moment McKenna said, “Tell us what’s going on.”

“They’re talking to the old man. He’s just talking. He’s acting scared.” A minute later he said, “He’s taping a picture of us up on the wall. The police are leaving.”

I breathed out in relief.

Ian turned to us. “The man can act.”

* * *

Around one in the morning Ian came over and sat next to me. “I think they’ve given up. The police have moved out of the square.”

“Completely?”

“No. There are still a few left. They also have a guy on top of the cathedral with binoculars.”

“Do you think it’s safe to go outside to the courtyard?”

He looked over at Taylor, then back at me. I think he understood why I was asking. “You’re okay.”

“Thanks,” I said. I walked over to Taylor. “Hey.”

She wouldn’t look at me.

“Ian said we can go outside.”

“Good,” she said. “Maybe Tessa would like to go for a midnight stroll.”

“Would you like to go outside with me?”

She just sat there for a moment, then exhaled slowly. “All right.”

I gave her my hand and pulled her up.

“Hey, where are you guys going?” Ostin said. “We’re not supposed to go out.”

“We’re just going out to the courtyard,” I said. “Ian said it’s okay.”

“We just need some fresh air,” Taylor said.

“I could use some too,” Ostin said.

“Not now, you don’t,” I said. I pulled the door open for Taylor and she stepped outside. I held her hand as we walked down the stairway. We sat on a bench in a corner of the courtyard. We kept our voices down. Even though no one could see us, we didn’t know if anyone was close enough to hear us. Just hearing English might be enough to get tipped off.

“Why are you giving me the cold shoulder?” I said.

“You know why.”

“I had my arm around her so they’d think we were tourists.”

“You were pretty convincing.”

“Do you really doubt how I feel about you? You can read my mind.”

She frowned. “It’s not you,” she said. “I’m just insecure.”

“About me?”

“About her,” Taylor said. “Tessa doesn’t like me.”

“Why would you say that?”

“I read her mind.”

“Why wouldn’t she like you?”

“Because she wants what I have,” Taylor said.

“What’s that?”

“You know what.”

I looked at her. “Why would you say that?”

“I told you. I heard her thinking.”

I just looked at her.

“You’re making me feel like a Peeping Tom,” she said.

“You are.”

“I’m not trying to be. It’s just that we’re in these small places, backs of trucks, hotel rooms . . . with Tessa around magnifying my power I can hear everyone’s thoughts without even touching them. You have no idea what’s going on in there. We’re a mess.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like, Jack is completely blaming himself for Wade’s death. He plans to die in Lima sinking the boat. Tessa hates Abigail and me. And Abigail is ready to call it quits.”

“She was ready to call it quits in Pasadena.”

“Well, now she’s really ready.”

“And me? What have you read in my mind?”

“You feel bad because I’m being cold to you and you love me.”

“Maybe it’s not all bad then.”

“I’m sorry. I just got jealous.”

“Why would you get jealous over me? You’re way out of my league.”

“I don’t know why you always say that,” she said. She leaned in to me. “Will you please just kiss me already?”

I put my arm around her and we kissed.

When we parted she said, “For the record, it’s the other way around.”

“What’s the other way around?”

“You’re out of my league. You’re just too nice to know it.”

I pulled her close. After a few minutes she asked, “What are we going to do about everyone? They’re falling apart.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I really don’t know.”

While I was thinking, someone starting shouting in Spanish. Then we heard glass break.

“We’d better go back in,” I whispered. I took Taylor’s hand and we climbed the stairs. Inside, everyone was sleeping, though I noticed

Tessa glance up at us as we entered. I wondered how long it would be before Jaime arrived.



The room's blinds were glowing from the first rays of dawn when there was a soft rap on our door, quickly followed by another. Everyone in the room woke at the sound, except for Ostin, who could sleep on an airport runway.

I looked at Ian, who had been sleeping on a blanket on the ground but was now rubbing his eyes. "Is it safe?"

"It's Jaime," he said groggily. "And the old man."

I got up and opened the door. Jaime's appearance shocked me. His head was wrapped in a bandage that covered one eye. Still he smiled.

"Mr. Michael," he said.

We embraced, then I stepped back and both men entered quickly. I shut the door behind them.

"What happened to you?" I asked Jaime.

"Our escape was not as easy as I hoped. They found us and they shot at us. I barely escaped."

"And your friends?"

He shook his head. "They were not as fortunate."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Me too," he said. "I am much grieved." He looked around the room. "Is everyone here?"

“Not everyone,” I said.

His eyebrows raised. “You are missing someone?”

“We lost Wade. He was shot by an Elgen guard.”

Jaime shook his head slowly. “I am sorry. We have all had losses.” He walked to the center of the room. “My friends, the police have given up their search, but the army is on their way here. They believe that you are still in Cuzco. We must get you out before they arrive. I have a truck outside. We must leave immediately.”

“Where are we going?” Zeus asked.

“We will drive to Lima, where we will wait for the Elgen fleet to arrive.”

Suddenly Abigail stood. “I’m not going.”

Everyone looked at her.

“I can’t do this anymore. I never wanted to come here. We’ve suffered so much. Jack’s been shot. And now we’ve lost Wade.” She breathed out heavily. “I’m going home.”

“Home?” Ian said.

“You still won’t be safe,” I said. “You’ll never make it alone.”

“She’s not going alone,” Zeus said. “I’m going with her.”

I looked at him in surprise. “You’re leaving us?”

“I’m sorry, but Abi’s right. It’s too much for us. Look at us. We’re a bunch of teenagers. We can’t stop them.” He looked around, then said in a softer voice, “We might as well make the most of the time we have left.”

I looked around at the group. A heavy despair had settled on the room.

“Anyone else planning on leaving?” I looked at Taylor. “Taylor?”

“You know better,” she said. She walked to my side.

“Ostin?”

“Of course I’m staying.”

“Tessa?”

She glanced at Taylor, then back at me. “Sorry. I think Zeus is right.”

“Jack?”

“I’m in this to the end.”

“Ian?”

Ian looked the most conflicted of anyone in the room—like he was being torn in two. Abigail looked into his eyes. “Come with us.”

He looked down for a moment, then back at me. “I’m sorry, Michael.”

I exhaled slowly. Everyone looked at McKenna. She was the only one who hadn’t picked a side.

“McKenna?” Abigail said. “It’s the three of us. It’s always been the three of us.”

McKenna glanced at Ostin, then back at Abigail. “You’re probably right. But I can’t let these guys down. They saved us from the academy.”

The room fell into silence.

I turned to Zeus. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” he said.

Ian looked at me. “Come with us, Michael. This is too risky. You don’t want any more blood on your hands.”

Jack exploded. “Wade’s blood isn’t on Michael’s hands!”

I put my hand on Jack’s arm to calm him. “It’s okay, man. He didn’t mean that.”

“No, I didn’t,” Ian said. “Wade’s blood is on the Elgen’s hands. And they’re not going to stop until they’ve taken all of our blood. The only way to win this game is to not play it. We’ll go someplace the Elgen will never find us. We’ll live together.” He looked at Jaime, then back at me. “It’s like Zeus said, if the world’s going to ruin, then we might as well enjoy it while we can.”

Jack’s expression turned hard. “Sometimes there are bigger things to live for than yourself.”

“Jack,” Abigail said softly. “Ian’s not being selfish, he’s being rational. And I don’t think you’re thinking about living.”

“Then there are things worth dying for,” Jack said.

“We’re not arguing with you, Jack,” Zeus said. “You’ve suffered as much as any of us. But that’s precisely our point. Haven’t you suffered enough? Why suffer any more?”

“Because there’s a chance we might be able to stop them,” Jack said.

“And what if you can’t?” Abigail said. “What if they’re just too big?”

Jack looked down for a moment as everyone anticipated his reply. Then he looked up, his eyes strong. “Then we’ll fail in glory.”

The room fell into complete silence. Then Jaime said, “You stay or you go, it is your choice. But for now everyone must leave Cuzco.” Jaime looked at the dissenters. “When we reach Lima, I will arrange for you to fly back to America.”

Jaime’s offer stung. Not just because I was losing my friends, but because deep inside I really wanted to go home with them.



Jaime had parked a meat refrigeration truck in front of the hostel, and when no one was around, he backed it up as close to the blue door as he could so we could enter without being seen by anyone in the alley. When he gave us the signal we took turns climbing in. I was the last to enter. Once I was inside Jaime shut the door, leaving us in darkness. McKenna lit up just bright enough so we could see one another.

“What kind of a truck is this?” Tessa asked. “It smells back here.”

“Is that blood?” Abigail asked, looking at the floor.

“It’s a meat truck,” Ostin said. He rubbed his face. “I feel like such a ham hock.”

In spite of the tension, I laughed.

* * *

The ride to Lima was long, nearly seven hundred miles and more than fifteen hours. Jaime stopped only once to get gas and let us use the bathroom. We slept through much of the drive, as much from trying to escape anxiety as from fatigue. Less than an hour out of Cuzco, a convoy of more than fifty army trucks passed us.

No one spoke about the fracture of the Electroclan, but the division was obvious. Consciously or not, we now sat in our own groups—those who were staying and those who were going.

In such a confined metal room, and with Tessa present, Taylor couldn't help but read everyone's thoughts, even though she struggled not to. I didn't have to read her mind to know how angry she was at Abigail. But I wasn't. Even at the academy, Abigail had wanted to go home. I supposed that I felt as if I'd deceived her. She had stayed only because I'd convinced her that it was for her own safety. But what we'd dragged her through since then was hardly for her own safety. What we were now planning, sinking the *Ampere*, certainly wasn't for her safety. I couldn't blame her for leaving. I couldn't blame anyone for leaving. Like I said, I wanted to go with them. But I couldn't. Something held me—something my mother always said. *All that's required for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.*

We arrived in Lima at two in the morning. We woke to the shuddering of the truck braking and shutting off, then the stringent smell of the ocean breeze as Jaime opened the back doors. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this. Jaime had brought us to a beautiful tile-roofed villa that overlooked the South Pacific. The house was on ten acres of fenced property at the end of a long, private gravel road surrounded by palm and white-washed orange trees leading up to a large fountain.

Wherever we were, we seemed to be miles from anything else, and for the first time in days I felt safe. Jaime unlocked the villa door, and we went inside. For the first time in what seemed like an eternity we all crashed in real beds with clean, sweet-smelling cotton sheets.

* * *

I awoke the next morning long after the sun had risen. I just lay for a while enjoying the comfort of a real bed, then got up and walked out to the kitchen. The smell of coffee brewing filled the dining area. Taylor was already up. She was thumbing through a travel book about Peru.

“Good morning,” I said.

She looked up and smiled. "Good morning. I'd ask how you slept, but I think I already know." She smiled again. "A *real* bed with *real* sheets and a *real* pillow. I almost felt like a *real* human again."

"You look like a *real* human," I said. I walked toward her. "What are you looking at?"

"Just this book that was here. It has pictures of Peru. Did you know that there are almost four thousand native varieties of potatoes in Peru?"

"No," I said. "But I bet Ostin does."

"Of course Ostin does," she said. "He's Ostin." She set aside the book. "Come sit by me."

I sat down next to her on the couch.

"Have you looked outside?"

"No."

"It's beautiful. There are flowers and palm trees. It's a real Spanish villa." She looked at me. "It's the calm before the storm."

"I'm afraid you're right."

We sat a moment in silence, then Taylor said, "Jaime left."

"Where?"

"He said he had some business."

"When is he coming back?"

"A few days."

"Did he say anything else?"

"There's food in the fridge and no one should leave the property."

"House arrest again?" I asked.

"Villa arrest. But at least this time we have real beds."

"With pillows."

Just then Ostin walked in. "Morning. What's for breakfast?"

"Potatoes," Taylor said.

"Doesn't surprise me," Ostin said. "There's almost four thousand different varieties in Peru."



In spite of our luxurious surroundings, the next three days passed in a dull emotional haze. There wasn't much to do. Lima had some electricity, so we could watch TV, but the stations were all in Spanish. So were the books in the house. There were playing cards, and all of us except Jack played Hearts or Texas Hold'em until even that got boring.

All that was left to do was to talk, and I suppose that was the thing we were all avoiding. After all we had been through, it was as if we were suddenly strangers again. Most heartbreaking to me was the tension between Abigail, Ian, and McKenna. I suppose all of them had reason to feel betrayed.

The least sociable of all of us was Jack. He didn't join in cards or talk or anything. He either stayed in his room or exercised in the garage, improvising exercise equipment from things he found around the house. He stuffed a laundry bag with sheets, hung it from a pergola, then pounded it for hours like a punching bag. He also ran in place, lifted large rocks, and did like a million push-ups. We all were worried about him. I couldn't stop thinking about what Taylor had said about him not planning on surviving the attack.

The evening of the second day, Taylor, Abigail, Zeus, and I were making dinner when Jack walked into the kitchen. His arm was covered with blood.

Taylor gasped. "What happened? Is that where you were shot?"

"No," he said. He held up his wound. He had cut a jagged line on his forearm below his tattoo. "What do you think?"

We were all speechless.

Zeus was the first to say something. "It's a lightning bolt?"

"No," Jack said. "It's two Ws."

"Two Ws?" Taylor said.

"What does it stand for?" I asked.

Jack looked at me with disappointment. "Wade West."

* * *

Jaime returned the third day, shortly after sunset. The meat truck was gone, and he was driving a white passenger van. Printed on the side, next to a picture of an Incan god, were the words: SACRED VALLEY INCA TOURS.

We all went out and helped carry in boxes of groceries, which were mostly fresh vegetables and meats and sausages wrapped in paper. There was also a box of clothing.

After we'd finished unloading the van, Jaime gathered us into the front room. When we were all seated, he said, "I have news. For those who are leaving, I have made arrangements for you to fly back to America in the morning."

The immediacy of the flight surprised us. Taylor gasped softly.

"Where are we going?" Abigail asked.

"I cannot tell you," he said. "But to a safe place."

"I've heard that twice before," she said. "Both times we were almost killed."

"I guarantee it is safe," Jaime said. "It is with our own people. They would like to talk with you and see if you have any information to help the cause. Then they will make arrangements for your future."

"What do you mean?" Tessa asked.

“Where and how you live will be your choice,” Jaime said. “But we know that the Elgen will not stop hunting you, so you will be given new identities. And you will have decisions to make about how much risk you will take.”

“Like the witness protection program,” Ostin said.

“Sí,” Jaime said. “We will do whatever we can to protect and help you. But it will take a little time to make everything right.” He looked at each of the four who were leaving. “Do you have any questions?”

When no one said anything, I raised my hand. “I’d like to say something.”

“Sí, Mr. Michael,” Jaime said.

I stood, suppressing my tics. “I know that some of you might feel guilty about leaving. I just want to say, don’t. You have already risked more than most people will in ten lifetimes. You’re already heroes.”

To my surprise, no one looked comforted at all. If anything, they looked more miserable.

“Michael is right,” Jaime said. “You have already risked more and done more to battle the Elgen than any of us. You may hold your heads high. One need not fight every battle, or die in the struggle, to be a hero.”

In spite of what we’d said, everyone still looked down.

After a minute Tessa asked, “What time do we leave?”

“Around ten,” Jaime said. “Perhaps a little earlier. There is a private airstrip not far from here. You will fly to Nicaragua, where we will change planes, then fly to our base in the U.S. I have brought fresh clothes for you so you are not so noticeable or uncomfortable.

“For those who are staying, we have received word that the Elgen fleet has passed through the Panama Canal. The first ships could arrive in Port Callao in just five days. So for now I suggest you get as much rest as you can.”

The two courses he’d just detailed highlighted the stark difference of our paths.

“Can we please go into town?” Taylor asked. “There’s a Hard Rock Cafe just a few miles away.”

Jaime shook his head. “No, it is much too dangerous. In times of national crisis, foreigners are closely watched. Yesterday the Lima

police arrested two people they thought were Zeus and Abigail.”

Zeus and Abigail exchanged glances. “They thought they were us?” Zeus asked.

“Yes. But they were just students. One of them from England.” Jaime looked around the room. “Any other questions?”

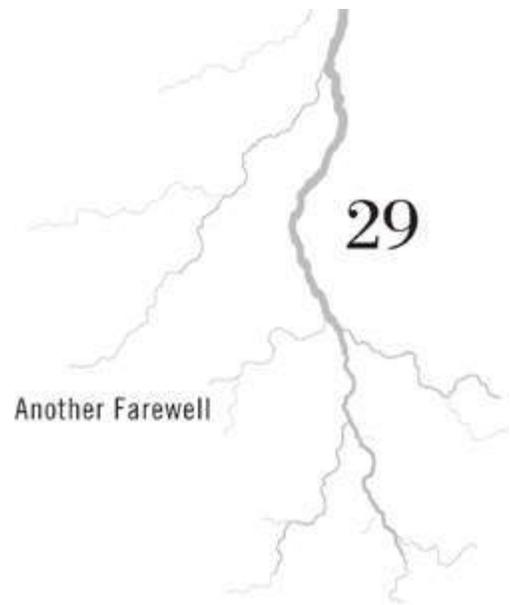
No one spoke.

“Okay. It is late. Get some rest.”

We looked at one another sadly. I wanted to say my good-byes—actually, I wanted to throw some kind of a farewell party, but in light of losing Wade, a party didn’t seem appropriate. In the end we all just went to bed.

* * *

That night I had a dream. Hatch was walking toward me, smiling. I lifted my hands to shock him, but my hands were gone.



I woke to the sound of talking and I looked at the digital clock next to my bed. It was already half past nine. I pulled on my pants and walked out into the kitchen.

Abigail, Zeus, Tessa, and Ian were sitting around the table eating omelets. They stopped talking as I walked in.

“Hey, Michael,” Zeus said.

“Good morning,” Abigail and Ian said simultaneously.

Tessa looked at me sadly and nodded. “Michael.”

They were all dressed in the new clothes Jaime had brought, which actually looked surprisingly cool. It was odd seeing them in clean clothing.

“You look so . . . normal,” I said.

“I know. I hardly recognized myself,” Abigail said.

I sat down at the table and looked over at Ian’s plate. His omelet had ham, onions, jack cheese, and peppers.

“That looks really good,” I said.

“Tessa made them,” Ian said.

“I like to cook,” Tessa said. “It’s kind of my thing. Especially omelets. I’m also good at making crepes.”

“You make crepes?” I said.

“She makes incredible crepes,” Ian said.

“You were holding out on me,” I said.

“It’s not like I could have made them in the jungle,” she said.

A few minutes later Taylor and McKenna came into the room. Taylor had her arm around McKenna, whose eyes were puffy. She looked as if she’d been crying all night. Ian got up and walked over to her. “Good morning,” he said. They embraced.

Ostin walked in. “Something smells good.”

“Omelets,” Zeus said. “Tessa’s specialty.”

Ostin looked in the kitchen “You didn’t save any for us?”

“Sorry,” she replied. “I didn’t know when you were getting up.”

“You thought we’d just let you leave without saying good-bye?” Ostin replied.

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

“What time is it?” Taylor asked.

“It’s almost time for us to go,” Tessa said. “We’re just waiting for Jaime.”

Then Jack appeared in the doorway. Abigail’s gaze followed him as he walked into the room. Their eyes met, but neither of them spoke.

“Here’s Jaime,” Ian said. “He’s driving up the lane now.”

A couple minutes later Jaime opened the door. “*Vámonos, hermanos,*” he said. He looked around at all of us. “I will give you a few minutes to say good-bye, then we must go.”

McKenna walked over to Ostin, and Taylor took my hand. For a moment we all just looked at one another.

Then Abigail walked across the kitchen to us. She stopped just a few feet in front of me. “I guess this is it,” she said. “Please don’t hate me.”

“Abi, when I was in Cell 25, I knew I couldn’t take the pain much longer before I’d break. But I didn’t because you saved me. I don’t know which of us is doing the right thing. All I know for sure is that I’ll never be able to repay you for what you did for me.”

Abigail’s eyes welled up with tears. I put my arms around her and she broke down crying. “I’m so sorry, Michael. I wish I were strong like you. I’m sorry I’m letting you down.”

I kissed her forehead. “Promise me something.”

“What?”

“Promise me that you’ll never regret your decision. If I were you, I would have done the same thing. And if something happens to us, it’s not your fault. You couldn’t have stopped it.” I looked into her eyes. “Some people weren’t born to fight. Some were born to pick up the pieces.”

She fell into my arms again and we held each other. “I’m going to miss you,” she said.

“I’m going to miss you, too,” I replied. “But we’ll see each other again.”

When we parted, Abigail’s cheeks were streaked with tears. She touched my cheek and for a moment I could feel my pain and fear go away. “When I see you again,” she said, “we’re going to have a big celebration.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I said.

Then Taylor stepped forward. “Good-bye, Abi,” she said. Her eyes were also filled with tears. “I’m sorry I’ve been so mean to you lately.”

“I understand,” Abigail said.

“I’ve just been so angry. Or maybe I’m just afraid. But Michael’s right. When Nichelle broke me, you were there to heal me. I’ll never be able to repay you for that.”

“You freed us,” Abigail said. “You’ve repaid me a hundred times over.”

The two of them embraced.

McKenna walked up to Abigail. They threw their arms around each other. When they parted, they were both crying.

“I love you,” McKenna said.

“I love you, too,” Abigail replied. “You be safe. Promise me.”

McKenna just smiled sadly, then the two embraced again.

Then Abigail walked over to Jack. She looked up into his eyes. “Most of all, I’m sorry I’m leaving you.”

“You’re doing the right thing,” he said. “You’re too good for this crap. You always were.” He took a deep breath. “Where do you think you’ll end up?”

“I don’t know. Wherever they send me. How about you?”

Jack shrugged. “Wherever the battle takes me.”

Abigail smiled sadly. "You really are a warrior, aren't you?"

"We'll find out soon enough."

"I already know," Abigail said. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. Then she looked intensely into his eyes, then kissed him on the mouth. "You have no idea how much I wish you were coming with me, but I know you need to do what you have to do. After you've kicked Hatch's butt, come back to me. I'll be waiting."

"What about Zeus?"

"We're just friends," she said.

"How will I find you?"

"The voice will know," she said. She took his hand. "Don't forget me."

"How could I forget you?"

Her eyes welled up with tears, and Jack put his arms around her and she cried for several minutes. Then she took a deep breath and leaned back. "I need to say one more thing, but it's kind of hard. I just want you to take it the right way."

Jack stared into her eyes. "Go ahead."

"I know that losing Wade was the worst thing that's ever happened to you. I also know that no matter what I say, you're still going to blame it on yourself. I'm just saying, don't go into battle trying to punish yourself. Promise me you won't be careless with your life." Abigail took his hand. "If you have to be a hero, then be a hero. But don't be a martyr. Please promise me."

Jack took a deep breath. After a moment he said, "I promise."

A tear ran down her cheek. "Thank you." She kissed him again, then stepped away.

Zeus walked up to Jack. "You take care, man. And punch Hatch for me."

"I'll do it," Jack said. "You take care of Abi. Keep her safe. And yourself."

Zeus nodded. "Will do, man." For a moment they both were silent. Then Zeus said, "You know, I owe you. You taught me what it means to be brave."

"No, man," Jack said. "When you blew the water pipes, you taught me."

Jack put out his hand. Zeus looked at him for a moment, then a sad smile crossed his face. "Sorry, but a handshake won't do." The two of them embraced. "When you sink that ship," Zeus said. "Make sure Hatch is on it."

Jack nodded. "I'll do my best."

"Michael," Tessa said as she walked up to me. "Thanks for everything."

"Thank you."

"I know things got a little awkward back here, but I'm really grateful for the time we spent together."

"Me too," I said. "Thanks for helping me save my friends."

"Thanks for making me do the right thing," she said. "I'm glad I did."

Outside, the van's horn honked and Tessa sighed. "I guess it's time." She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. Then she looked at Taylor. "Good luck, Taylor."

"Thanks," Taylor said.

"Take care of each other."

Tessa looked at me once more, then walked away. All of us walked outside to the idling van. Abi, Zeus, and Tessa climbed inside. Ian stopped and looked at McKenna. There were tears in both their eyes. Then McKenna ran up to him and they embraced. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too," Ian said. "More than I can say."

When they finally separated, Ian said, "You stay safe. Promise me. I don't want to hear any bad news. Not about you. I couldn't take that."

"I'll do my best."

"Keep her safe," he said to Ostin. "She's your responsibility now."

"I'll do everything I can," Ostin said.

Ian turned to me. "Yo, Michael."

I walked up to him and we clasped hands.

"Listen," he said. "Just sink the ship, then get out of there."

"That's the plan," I said. We embraced. "You've been a good friend."

"I feel guilty leaving you here. I know you could use my help."

"We'll manage," I said.

He looked at me, then nodded. "If anyone can, it's you. You're the bravest kid I've ever met." He exhaled. "Better go." He climbed into the van. "See ya."

"Ciao," Taylor said.

McKenna blew him a kiss. He smiled sadly, then shut the door.

"I'll be back later tonight," Jaime said to me.

"Travel safe," I said.

"*Vayan con Dios*," Ostin said.

Then the van sped away, leaving the five of us alone.



Taylor and I held hands as we watched them go. Even though I'd never admit it to the others, a part of me felt like I was watching my hopes drive away with them. We were already the underdogs, and now we'd lost half our team. I don't think I had felt that discouraged since Cell 25.

"We better go back inside," Jack said. "Before someone sees us."

We all followed him into the house. McKenna was sobbing and Ostin was doing his awkward best to comfort her. I wasn't doing a whole lot better than she was. I was twitching like crazy. When we were inside, Taylor turned to me. "Are you okay?"

"Just my Tourette's," I said.

"Tourette's or not," she said, "you're wrong."

"I'm wrong about what?"

"What you were just thinking."

"Quit reading my mind," I said angrily, wondering what she had read. "It's like reading someone's journal without their permission."

"I can't always help it," she said. "Especially when you're thinking about me."

"What was I thinking?" I asked.

"That you should have made me go with them."

“So?” I said. “Is it wrong to think I don’t want your blood on my hands?”

“My blood on *your* hands?” she replied. “What about *your* blood on *my* hands? I’m a big girl, I can make up my own mind. This battle is as much mine as yours. Who do you think led the Electroclan when you weren’t around?”

“I’m not saying that you’re not capable,” I said. “But if something happened to you . . .”

“And what if something happens to you? Am I supposed to just deal with that? Do you think you’re the only one who’s afraid of losing someone they love?”

“I didn’t say that,” I said, then added, “or *think* that.”

“No. But you were going to.”

“Great, now you know what I’m *going* to think?”

She looked at me for a moment, then she grinned. “Sorry.” She put her arms around me. “I can’t lose you either. So we’ll just stay close. That way if something happens to one of us, it will happen to both of us.”

“That doesn’t sound hopeful,” I said.

“Nothing sounds hopeful right now,” she replied.

Ostin walked up to us. “I’m going to make some breakfast. Anyone hungry?”

“I am,” Taylor said.

“Me too,” I said. “What are you making?”

“Omelets,” Ostin said. “Tessa left all the stuff out to make them.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“What about McKenna?” Taylor asked.

“She says she’s not hungry,” Ostin replied.

“You better ask Jack if he wants something,” I said.

As if on cue, Jack walked into the kitchen. He got a tall glass out of the cupboard, then walked over to the refrigerator, broke a half dozen eggs into a glass, then swallowed them raw. He wiped his mouth with his arm, then walked back out to the garage.

“I think he just had breakfast,” Taylor said.

* * *

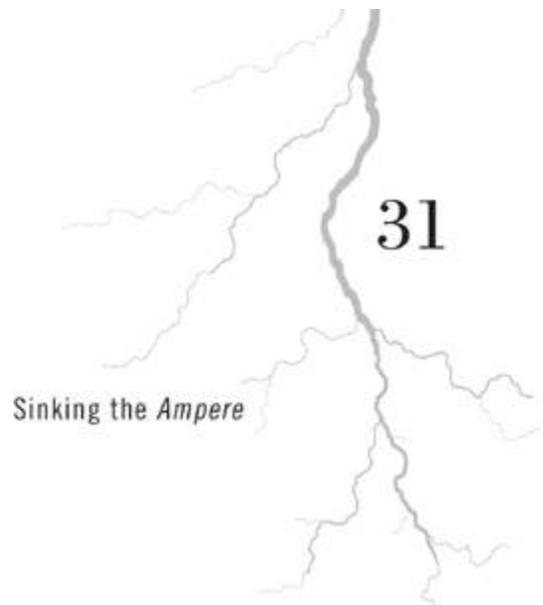
After breakfast, Ostin went to find McKenna, while Taylor and I cleaned up the kitchen. We were drying the last of the dishes when Taylor put her hand on my cheek. “You need to get some rest. You still look like you haven’t slept for days.”

“I just can’t get enough rest,” I said.

“Come here.” She took my hand and led me to one of the vacant bedrooms. “Lie on your stomach,” she said, pointing to the bed.

I stretched out over the bed and Taylor lay on her side next to me. She lifted my shirt, then ran her fingernails along my back and up my neck into my hair, just like my mother used to do when I was little. It was the best feeling in the world.

Unfortunately, it didn’t take long for me to fall asleep.



Jaime returned as the sun was setting, a huge red ball sinking slowly into the indigo-blue ocean. I was woken by the sound of his car door slamming. I sat up and looked around the dark room, then at the clock. Had I really slept more than six hours? The house was quiet, and with the exception of Taylor's breathing, I couldn't hear a thing.

I quietly got up and walked out to the front room. I turned the lights on in the hallway, then the front room. Jaime had opened the door and was carrying in several boxes.

"I brought some more food," he said.

"Is there anything else in the car?"

"Si."

I walked out to the van and grabbed several large packages of bottled water and brought them back in while Jaime made a second trip, bringing in the rest of the food. I put the water in the refrigerator as Jaime put away the rest of the groceries.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I think they're sleeping."

"They went to bed early," he said.

I didn't tell him that we had gone to bed shortly after he'd left. "Did their flight take off okay?"

He nodded. "Sí." He glanced at his wristwatch. "They should almost be to Nicaragua by now."

As much as I hated seeing them go, I was happy to hear they were out of Peru. "At least they're safe," I said.

"For now," he said gravely. "For now." He patted me on the shoulder. "If you think your friends will wake up, I am going to make some dinner. *Seco de cordero*."

"What's that?"

"It is a Peruvian specialty. Lamb stew with potatoes. The lamb is cooked in beer until it is tender then seasoned with *ají* peppers and cilantro."

"That sounds good," I said. "Do you need any help?"

"Sí. Gracias. You can peel the potatoes."

While we were preparing dinner, I turned to Jaime. "I still haven't spoken to my mother."

"We have not had a time to arrange it. I will do my best to contact the voice tonight."

When we were ready to eat, I went back to the room and gently woke Taylor. She was as disoriented as I had been.

"What time is it?" she asked, pulling her hair back from her face.

"It's time for dinner," I said.

She squinted at me. "Dinner? How long did I sleep?"

"Most of the day."

She pushed herself up. "Where's everyone else?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "We need to get them."

We searched the house. We found Jack in the garage working out. He was drenched in sweat and his muscles were pumped, his biceps bulging like grapefruits. His knuckles were red from pounding his homemade punching bag.

"Time to eat," I said.

"I'll be right there," he said.

We found Ostin and McKenna in McKenna's room. Ostin was holding McKenna while she slept and he put his finger over his lips to silence me.

“Dinnertime,” I whispered.

He just waved me off. “I’m not hungry.”

As we walked out I turned to Taylor. “Did he really just say that?”

“Wow,” she said. “That’s the power of love.”

We laughed the whole way to the kitchen.

* * *

The stew was delicious and easily the best meal we’d had since coming to Peru. Halfway through dinner Ostin and McKenna joined us. I’m glad they did. It had been a traumatic day, and it was good to come together.

Jack was quiet during the meal, and Taylor tried to engage him. “How long have you been working out?”

“All day,” he replied.

“Aren’t you tired?”

He looked at her as if the question hadn’t crossed his mind. Or, more likely, was irrelevant. “I’m preparing.”

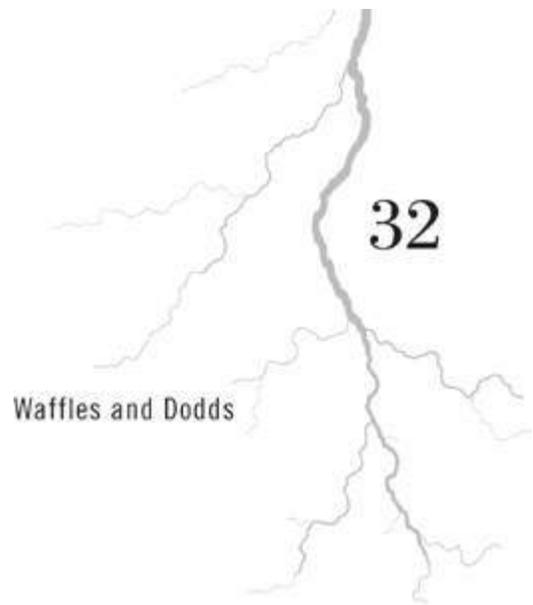
“That is good,” Jaime said. “We must prepare. There is much to do before the Elgen fleet arrives. Tonight I am picking someone up from the airport. We will be here in the morning.”

“Who are you picking up?”

“Someone who can help us,” he said.

“Help us do what?” Taylor asked.

He looked at us seriously. “Sink the *Ampere*.”



I couldn't believe we were eating real waffles. While we were doing the dishes the day before, Taylor had discovered a waffle iron, and we were all pretty excited about making waffles for breakfast. We didn't have any pancake syrup, but Ostin knew a trick for making it with brown sugar and vanilla and it tasted pretty much like the real thing. With fresh butter they tasted almost as good as my mother used to make. Or maybe it had just been so long since I'd eaten anything like that, it just seemed that way.

Jaime arrived as we were cleaning up. He unlocked the door and walked in. "We are here!" he shouted.

We walked out to see who Jaime had brought home. Standing next to him was a man we'd never seen before. He was tall, at least six inches taller than Jaime, though just as thin. He had messy flaxen hair, a thin face, and a long, beaklike nose, on which rested round, wire-rimmed glasses. We all looked at him curiously.

"This is Mr. Dodds," Jaime said. "Mr. Dodds is a naval specialist. And a member of the resistance."

"Hello," he said. "You may call me Bob." He had an accent that sounded almost British but not quite. "Or Mr. Dodds."

"Are you South African?" Ostin asked.

“You are very astute,” he replied. “You must be Ostin.”

Ostin looked impressed. “Yes, sir.”

“May I say, I have very much looked forward to meeting all of you. Like so many others, I have followed your adventures and I am most impressed with your courage and cleverness.”

“It’s just survival,” I said.

“Well, I hope to be of service to you,” he said. “And help you *survive* even longer. I’ve been asked to brief you on the Elgen fleet and help you in your task to sink the *Ampere*.”

“Let us talk in the dining room,” Jaime said.

“Have you had breakfast?” Taylor asked. “We made waffles.”

“Ah, waffles. Unfortunately we had breakfast at the hotel,” he said. “But thank you very much. May I use this table over here?” He pointed to the kitchen table.

“We need to wipe it off,” Taylor said. “It’s sticky.”

I picked up the few plates left on the table, then Taylor ran a damp cloth over it.

Dodds set his briefcase on the table, then opened it. He took out several folded blueprints and laid them out until they covered the table’s surface. We all gathered around the table.

“To understand the composition of the Elgen fleet, you must first understand why they even have one. The crimes the Elgen have committed are serious enough to land the entire board in prison for the rest of their lives. They are guilty of money laundering, conspiracy, bribery, fraud, securities fraud, tax evasion, extortion, espionage, and, though still unproven, mass murder.

“About four years ago, when the FBI began looking into the Elgen’s criminal activities, Chairman Schema purchased a sizable yacht and moved the Elgen operations to international waters.

“Their first ship was an older-model yacht they renamed the *Edison*. Now, in international waters and belonging to no nation, the Elgen have become a nation unto themselves. They manage their corporation from the ship and move their money through offshore banks in Switzerland, Bermuda, and Cyprus.

“As the Elgen grew, they sold the *Edison* and moved to a custom designed boat called the *Ampere*. The *Ampere* is a state-of-the-art

luxury superyacht. Think of it as a floating Waldorf hotel with surface-to-air missiles.”

“McKenna has been on it,” Taylor said.

She nodded. “It’s pretty amazing.”

“For a half billion dollars, it should be,” Dodds said. “If you have something to add or if I say anything that you have found inaccurate, please feel free to contribute.”

McKenna nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Dodds continued. “The *Ampere* is the first of many ships the Elgen have since acquired. Today, the Elgen fleet consists of seven ships, each named after a famous scientist of electricity. If the Elgen were a country, the *Ampere* would be their capital. It is the throne from which Admiral Hatch runs his kingdom.”

“Admiral Hatch?” Ostin said.

“That is what he now calls himself,” Dodds said. “Actually, his full title is Supreme Commander General Admiral Hatch.” He shook his head. “I’m going to give you a rundown of the complete fleet.” He handed each of us a piece of paper with pictures of seven boats. “This is a list of the Elgen boats. You are to memorize it, then destroy it.”

I looked at the sheet. It had a picture of each boat accompanied with technical jargon.

“The first boat on your sheet is the *Ampere*. We’ll discuss it in greater detail a bit later. The second boat is the *Faraday*. It is a twenty-thousand-ton refurbished World War Two troopship and, accordingly, is used to transport Elgen guards. It can carry in excess of thirty-five-hundred passengers.

“Boat three is the *Watt*, the most powerful of the Elgen fleet. The *Watt* is a fully operational battle cruiser. Think of it as the fleet’s bodyguard. It is a highly lethal ship, with technology only the most advanced navies carry, including tactical tomahawk cruise missiles, torpedoes, long-range cannons, and advanced targeting systems.

“A few years ago, while the *Ampere* was sailing from the Formosa Strait to the Mediterranean, they passed through the pirate-infested waters of Somalia. As happens too often these days, Somalian pirates tried to capture the *Ampere*, which, frankly, had they succeeded, would have been a blessing to the world.

“The *Watt* blew the pirate ship out of the water more than a mile out, then hunted down its survivors and gunned them down in the waters. The *Watt* is captained by Viktor Chirkev, a former rear admiral in the Russian navy. He is a skilled captain and known to shoot first and ask questions later.

“Boat four is the *Volta*, the Elgen’s science ship. It is where Elgen experiments are conducted. It is also where, we believe, the original MEI is being carried.

“Boat five, the *Joule*, is the most secretive of the fleet. We do not know much about it except that it is the fastest of the fleet and, if necessary, can submerge. We believe that it’s a floating bank vault and where the Elgen keep billions of dollars of gold bullion, foreign currencies, and diamonds, which would explain why the *Joule* is almost always in close proximity to the *Watt*.

“Boat six is the *Ohm*. The *Ohm* is a supply ship and will be the most active during the docking in Port Callao. A floating commissary if you will.

“Boat seven is the *Tesla*. The *Tesla* is a tender, a small landing craft, used for getting troops from the *Faraday*. As the waters surrounding Tuvalu are too shallow to dock the *Faraday*, the *Tesla* will be transporting guards to the shore for the attack. The *Tesla* can carry seventy guards and crew at a time. Even though it is primarily a transport, it is still armed and dangerous. It is equipped with twin fifty-caliber machine guns and a twenty-millimeter Oerlikon cannon. And, of course, the soldiers’ weaponry.” He looked us over. “That’s the Elgen fleet.”

“It’s a freakin’ navy,” Ostin said.

“Fortunately we don’t have to sink the whole navy. Just the *Ampere*,” Dodds said. “You cut off the serpent’s head, the rest of the serpent dies.” He looked out over the table. “These are blueprints from the ship,” Dodds said. “The *Ampere* is custom designed with a gross weight of eleven thousand tonnes with a displacement configuration. The ship is powered by a triple-screw, diesel-electric propulsion system with four marine diesel engines. It has a maximum speed of twenty-five knots and a cruising speed of twenty-two.”

I understood only about half of what Dodds was talking about, but Ostin nodded with interest.

“How do you know all of this?” I asked.

Dodds looked at me. “You should know, Michael. You brought us this information.”

“When did I . . .” I stopped. “Grace,” I said.

Grace was one of the electric children we had freed from the academy. She had the ability to download information from computers, and she’d taken just about everything from the academy before we got her out.

Dodds nodded. “She has been a veritable gold mine. We just keep extracting more and more valuable information.

“So back to our target. The *Ampere* is one hundred and forty-five meters long and the hull is constructed of steel built over an aluminum superstructure with Kevlar insulation. It has advanced buoyancy system that will keep it afloat even after a hull breach. It is one tough ship.”

“How do we sink it?” I asked.

“We don’t,” Dodds said. “We blow it up. The engine room is on the first level, here,” he said, touching the blueprint. “The *Ampere*’s fuel tanks hold more than a quarter million gallons of diesel fuel. With enough explosives in the engine room we can set off the tanks. If you blow a quarter million gallons of fuel, you’ll blow the entire ship to pieces.”

We all looked at each other. “How do we get the bomb on the boat?” I asked.

“There’s the rub,” Dodds said. “There will be guards all along the shore, and the gangplank will be highly guarded day and night.”

“We could disguise ourselves as Elgen guards and walk on,” Jack said, looking at me.

“It wouldn’t work,” Dodds said. “They are checking everyone who comes on the boat with metal detectors and fingerprint identification. Even if you got on, you’d never carry the explosives past them.”

“If they’re loading up with supplies,” Taylor said, “we could sneak into some of the supply boxes and have them carry us on.”

“Clever,” Dodds said, “but they’re prepared for that too. Their security is like the one you’ll find at an airport, except much more advanced. Everything that enters the ship must pass through a type of backscatter X-ray machine. Remember, these guys developed the MEI. They know how to scan.”

Jack leaned forward. “We could take a small raft to the back of the boat and throw a grappling hook,” he said. “And climb up.”

“The deck is more than a hundred feet up,” Dodds said. “You would have to shoot it up. Which means you would need a grapple gun. We can expect that the decks will be patrolled by guards and a grappling hook would be easy to see. You would run a high risk of being discovered and shot before you even climbed to the deck.”

Dodds was starting to annoy me. “So, you’ve told us why none of our ideas would work. What’s your plan?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have one,” Dodds said. “The Electroclan has continually succeeded where we have failed. We were hoping you would come up with something.”

“You said the hull is made of steel?” McKenna asked.

“Yes,” Dodds replied.

“We don’t need a grappling hook. Michael could magnetically climb it. The way Kylee does.”

I looked at her. “I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“You did in the Starxource plant,” Jack said. “When the rats were chasing us. You could carry the rope up, tie it, then throw it down. Then I’ll climb up, and we’ll pull up everyone else.”

“It would have to be at night,” Jaime said. “Or else the other boats in the fleet would see you.”

“That could work,” Dodds said, looking at me. “What do you think? Could you climb it?”

“I’ll need to practice,” I said. “And my knot tying. I haven’t tied anything since Cub Scouts.”

“I can arrange both,” Jaime said.

“The next question is, how do we get around to the back of the boat without being seen?”

“Scuba,” Ostin said.

“Scuba?” Taylor said. “What if there are sharks?”

“Sharks rarely attack humans,” Ostin said. “Besides, there are much worse things than sharks on the *Ampere*.”

“Like Hatch,” I said. I looked at Taylor. “I say we keep scuba as one of the options.”

“If we’re already diving,” Jack said, “why don’t we just put the explosives under the boat and blow it out of the water?”

“The *Ampere* has a reinforced hull and is shaped to deflect a hull explosion. Also, the ship’s sonar will detect anything directly under the boat more than four feet in length. They would have divers down after you in seconds.”

“If this was a suicide mission, it wouldn’t matter,” Jack said.

Everyone went quiet.

I looked at Jack. “But it’s not,” I said.

Jack just looked ahead with dark eyes. “But it would work.”

“Not necessarily,” Dodds said. “As I said, the hull is shaped to deflect an explosion. Think of it this way. If you grasp a firecracker in your hand, it will blow up your hand. If you set it flat on your palm, it will hurt but it won’t do much damage. That’s the difference between putting the explosive inside the boat as opposed to outside of it.”

“Then we’ll get more dynamite,” Jack said.

“We’re not using dynamite,” Dodds said. “We’ll be using a much more stable water-gel explosive. But either way, one person could not carry enough to sink the *Ampere* from the outside. In fact, all of you together couldn’t carry enough.”

“Then we fill a boat with explosives and ram it,” Jack said.

“That would fall under the whole suicide-mission thing,” I said.

No one else said a word. Jack’s comment had left everyone speechless. After a moment Dodds said, “Let’s move on. As difficult as boarding will be, it is only the beginning. The *Ampere* is just as protected on board as it is overboard.

“The Elgen are exacting about their security. It is rumored that the *Ampere* has antiphotograph lasers that sweep the boat’s surroundings for cameras. When it detects a CCD, they shine a laser into the camera’s lens to prevent a photograph from being taken.”

“What’s a CCD?” Taylor asked.

“It’s a charge-coupled device,” Ostin said. “In a CCD image sensor, pixels are—”

I stopped him. “It’s something in a camera,” I said.

“Then how did you get this photograph?” Taylor asked.

Dodds smiled. “Very carefully.” He looked back down at the blueprint. “In addition, the boat is equipped with a shipwide camera surveillance system, an intruder detection system, armor-plated doors, and bulletproof windows. We aren’t certain how the intruder detection system works, but we suspect that, with all the deck activity during loading, the system will be turned off. But the surveillance cameras will still be a problem.”

“Zeus was good with those,” Ostin said. “He’d just blow them out.”

“That’s not helpful,” I said.

“We could make a distraction,” McKenna said. “We could blow up something like we did in Paucartambo.”

“No,” Dodds said, shaking his head. “At best it would only distract them for a few minutes. And if something unexpected happens, the Elgen will go on heightened alert. They’ll pull in like a threatened turtle.”

“Then we’ll need to look like them,” I said. “Like we did in the Starxource plant.”

“How do we get Elgen uniforms?” Taylor asked.

“We could steal them,” Jack said.

“No,” Dodds said. “That would be another red flag. The Elgen are very strict about missing uniforms. They are like the owner of a burger joint who counts the cups each night to make sure his employees aren’t giving away free drinks to their friends.”

“My friend Sara used to do that,” Taylor whispered to me.

“But we could take *one*,” Jaime said. “That wouldn’t cause any suspicion. The Elgen sailors often go AWOL.”

“What good is one?” Taylor asked. “There are five of us.”

“We take one, and we copy it,” Jaime said. “We can make them close enough that they will not notice the difference.”

“Do we have time for that?” Jack asked.

“My people could make five uniforms in one day. The boats will be in port at least three days.”

“What if no one leaves the boat?” Ostin asked.

“The sailors have been at sea for many weeks. Trust me, they will come ashore,” Jaime said. “Leave it to me.”

“So we will duplicate the uniforms,” Dodds said. “But we’ll need black cover-ups to go over them as you climb onto the ship.”

“So we make a black cloak too,” Jaime said. “Simple.”

“Okay, one more thing,” Dodds said. “All the exterior doors and some of the interior doors on the *Ampere* are locked with magnetic switches.”

“This just keeps getting better,” McKenna said.

“Then how do we get through them?” Taylor asked.

“You will have to find a key,” Dodds said. “This probably won’t be too difficult, as every crew member will have one. You can take one from a guard, or perhaps when you get the uniform . . .”

“No problem,” Jaime said. “We will take the key with the uniform.”

Dodds looked back down at the blueprints and touched a spot near the boat’s stern. “This is where you will climb up. Once you’re all on board, you will gather here, at this door, which opens to a staircase. From what we know, this back staircase is a fire escape and is rarely used, usually only in the case of an emergency. It leads to all levels, including level one. It is very narrow so you will have to travel in single file.

“At the bottom of the stairwell, you will move forward approximately thirty yards to the engine room.”

“How will we know if we’re going the right way?” Taylor asked.

“You’re already at the back of the boat, so there is no other way to go. Also, you will hear the *Ampere*’s engines long before you reach the engine room. The crew wears earplugs. This could be a problem in the hallway as you will have difficulty communicating with one another because of the noise.”

“Even when the boat’s docked?” I asked.

“The captain will usually keep at least one engine idling to keep it from drifting and to charge the batteries.” He looked up again. “You must remember, the engine room will not be unmanned. Even at night, there will be six to ten crewmen. They will probably be unarmed, but do not count on it. You will have to take out the crew,

set the explosive and timer, then escape the ship before it explodes. It's that simple."

"Simple?" I said.

"Sorry," Dodds replied. "In concept it's simple. In practice it will be very . . . challenging."

"By challenging do you mean hopelessly impossible?" Taylor said.

He shook his head sympathetically. "Hopefully *not* impossible." He looked around at us. "But from what I've seen, this group seems to specialize in the impossible. Are there any questions?"

No one spoke for a moment, then Ostin said, "Yeah. Is it too late to back out?"



That evening Jaime and I drove out to the country, looking for a place for me to practice climbing.

“There,” he said. “I thought I remembered seeing that.” He pointed out over the fence to a tall cylindrical structure. “It is a grain silo. It is made of steel.”

When we were certain that no one was around, we climbed over a barbwire fence to the farm, then walked fifty yards to the base of the silo.

“Do you know whose farm this is?” I asked.

Jaime shook his head. “No.”

“Will anyone see us?” I asked.

“I hope not. You climb. I will keep lookout.”

The silo was made of ribbed, galvanized steel and rose about forty feet high, the top tapering off to a cone.

The best way to describe what it’s like magnetizing myself is to say it’s like pulsing inside my body instead of outside of it—a little like stifling a sneeze.

I reached my hand as high above me as I could, then pulsed. My hand stuck firmly to the cool metal. Then, pulsing my legs, I jumped up with my knees against the silo. Both my knees stuck. For a moment

I just sat there, stuck in place. As Jack had said, I had climbed the wall at the Starxource plant, but it was really just hanging on. Actually climbing upward involved more than just sticking to the metal, but a carefully timed process of sticking, releasing, then re-sticking.

It took me ten minutes to climb just ten feet. At this rate it would take me an hour to climb the *Ampere*, far too long to hang on to the side of the boat without being seen.

After some experimenting, I developed a rhythm, shifting my magnetism from one side of my body to the other. About twenty feet up, I accidentally released one side before fully magnetizing the other and fell about five feet before, in panic, I magnetized my entire body and stuck to the side of the silo like a magnet on a refrigerator door.

I climbed to the top of the silo and back down again in about a half hour, which wasn't too bad considering that the first twenty minutes I was still figuring out what I was doing. When I got down I was covered with sweat and panting. I leaned over on my knees to catch my breath.

"Let's try again," Jaime said.

I looked up. "What?"

"Not fast enough. This time I will time you. On your mark, get set, go."

I jumped up and began climbing. It reminded me of the time in seventh grade gym class when we had to climb the rope to the ceiling. I didn't set any gym records, but at least I had made it to the top.

This brought to mind another problem. Ostin, who was not only out of shape but also afraid of heights, made it only a third of the way before he gave up and slid down, which gave him a wicked rope burn on his thighs and arms. His mother called the school the next day and gave the gym teacher an earful. After all we'd been through, Ostin was in better shape than he was back then, but still I wondered if he could do it.

I reached the top of the silo, then slid back down in a controlled slide. I dropped the last six feet to the ground, rolling on the grass below.

"How'd I do?"

Jaime nodded. "Very good. You made it to the top in four minutes. If you can keep this fast, you will climb the side of the boat in less than fifteen minutes."

"Except I'll be wearing an Elgen uniform and cloak," I said.

"Yes, and carrying a heavy rope," Jaime added.

"I didn't think about that," I said. "I better practice with the rope."

"I will purchase one tomorrow," Jaime said. "We will come back tomorrow."

On the drive back to the villa, I said, "Any word on my mother?"

Jaime shook his head. "It is very strange," he said. "The voice is not responding to our signal."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I don't know. But I will keep trying." After a few more minutes he said, "I am worried about our friend Jack."

"So am I," I said. "He hasn't been the same since we lost Wade. He blames himself for Wade's death."

"That is bad," Jaime said.

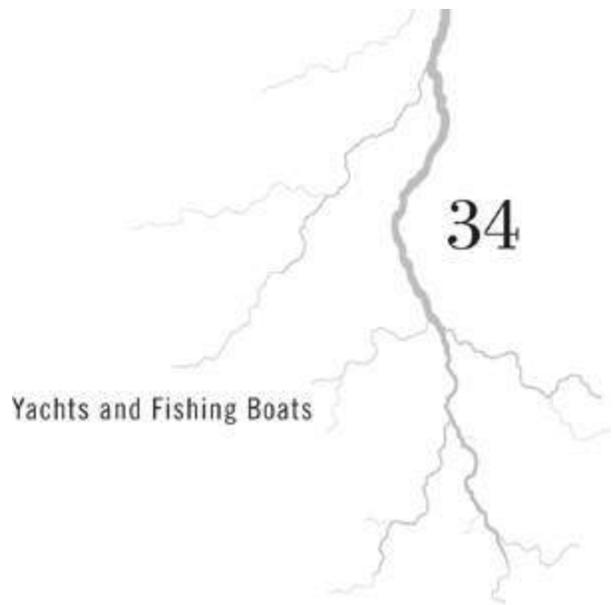
"Taylor told me that she read his mind and he's not expecting to survive the attack. It's like he's just accepted this is going to be a suicide mission."

Jaime nodded slowly. "Perhaps that is his wish."

"That's what I'm afraid of." I frowned. "I don't know what to do when someone loses hope."

"You pray for them, my friend. You pray for them."

We were quiet the rest of the ride home.



I'm not sure why Jaime didn't just stay at the villa with us, but he didn't. He usually just showed up when we needed him—like for my climbing practices. The next day we found an abandoned metal storage shed closer to the house. I went there twice a day until I got my time down to just twelve minutes. Taylor started coming with me to watch. Or maybe just to feel like a cheerleader again. She was good at that. She even made up a cheer.

*Go, Michael.
Climb that wall.
Reach the top
And please don't fall.
Gooooooooo, Michael!*

Then she'd do this little kick thing. Jaime just looked at her like she was crazy. Truthfully, her cheering was counterproductive. The first time she did the whole cheer, I started laughing so hard that I fell ten feet.

* * *

The next three days were an emotional roller coaster for me. At one moment I imagined us sinking the boat, escaping, and flying home, having saved the country of Tuvalu, wherever that was. The next moment the whole thing looked like a suicide mission.

On the morning of the third day, Jaime came in while we were all eating breakfast. Taylor had made French toast and fried Peruvian bacon, which was so thick it looked like ham.

“You’re early,” I said. “I thought we were going at eleven.”

“Get something to eat,” Taylor said. “Help yourself, I made a ton.”

Jaime looked at us seriously. “The Elgen fleet is in port.”

We all stopped eating.

“All of them?” Ostin asked.

“Sí.”

“I want to see it,” I said.

“You will soon enough,” Jaime said. “When we attack.”

“I need to see it before then. I need to see it in daylight.”

“That is risky.”

“Unlike sneaking aboard and sinking it,” Ostin said.

“I have to see it,” I said firmly. “I need to know what I’m facing. I need to visualize the attack.”

Jaime looked unsure. “I will have to see if Dodds can come.”

“We don’t need Dodds,” I said. “I just want to see the boats for myself.”

“Me too,” Jack said.

“And me,” Taylor said.

Jaime looked at us for a moment, then said, “Very well. I must make arrangements to capture our sailor’s uniform, then I will be back.”

“Don’t forget his magnetic key,” Ostin added.

“Sí. And the key. Then we will go visit the Elgen.”

* * *

Jaime returned to the house around five in the afternoon. All five of us were waiting for him in the front room and walked out to meet him before he reached the front door.

When we were in the van, Taylor said, “Jaime, did you set your sailor trap?”

“*Sí, señorita.*”

“What are you using for bait?” she asked.

“A pretty woman, of course.” Then he added, “It works every time.”

“Worked for me,” Ostin said, looking over at McKenna. She smiled at him.

“Wow,” Taylor whispered to me. “Just wow.”

* * *

Jaime drove north up the Pacific coastline about twenty miles before we came to a solitary cliff overlooking the Port Callao harbor. We reached the port after the sun had begun making its descent, turning the bay a hue of golden rose.

After Jaime was completely certain that we were not being watched, he retrieved a pair of binoculars from beneath the van’s driver seat and we walked out to the edge of the cliff and got down on our stomachs. The Callao bay stretched out below us, bustling with barges and cranes, navy ships, yachts, freighters, and cruise liners.

“That’s a lot bigger than I thought it would be,” Taylor said.

“Port Callao is the largest seaport in South America,” Jaime said.

“What does Callao mean?” Ostin asked.

Jaime looked at him. “This you do not know?”

“Nope,” he said.

Jaime nodded. “Neither does anyone else.” He pointed to a group of ships a few hundred yards north of us. “They are there, all together,” he said, handing me his binoculars.

Even without the binoculars I recognized the vessels. It was impressive to actually see all seven boats of the Elgen fleet together—impressive and *terrifying*.

The *Ampere* was in the middle of the fleet and wasn’t hard to pick out. It was the coolest boat I had ever seen—the kind of craft Ostin would have cut out of his *Popular Science* magazine and pinned to his wall.

What made it even more fascinating was knowing that Hatch was somewhere on that ship. I just wished that I could throw a massive lightning ball and blow the ship and Hatch off the planet.

“So that’s the *Ampere*,” I said.

“Sí,” Jaime said.

“I told you it was cool,” McKenna said.

“The space shuttle is cool,” Ostin said. “That thing is freakin’ epic.”

“And we’re going to sink it,” I said. “It’s kind of sad in a way. Like blowing up a cathedral.”

“More like a house of horrors,” McKenna said.

“They are docked close together for protection,” Jaime said. “You can see the guards have blocked off the entire shoreline.”

Ostin grimaced. “If we scuba dived in, we’d have to swim at least a half mile underwater.” He was the only one of us who had actually scuba dived, and that was during a highly supervised excursion on a family trip to Hawaii. “That won’t be easy.”

“What part of any of this is easy?” Jack said.

“I’m just saying, it’s going to add at least an hour getting there and we’ll all be exhausted when we do. And by the time we blow the ship and get back to shore, the place will be crawling with military. How will we come ashore?”

“We’ll have to set a longer delay on the explosive’s timer,” I said.

“Which gives them more of a chance to find it,” Jaime said.

“And where do we put the scuba tanks while we climb the boat?” McKenna asked.

None of us had an answer.

I looked back out over the fleet. “What are those boats out there? The little ones behind the fleet.”

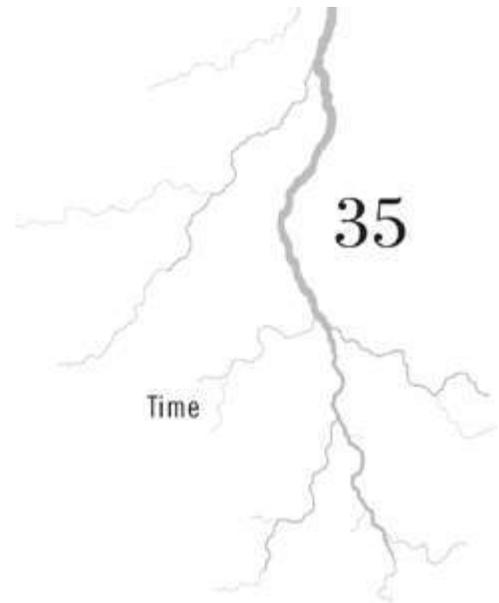
“Fishing boats,” Jaime said.

“They’re close to the ships,” I said.

McKenna had the binoculars and was looking out at the boats. “That one’s not even a hundred feet from the *Ampere*,” she said.

“They don’t suspect them,” Ostin said.

Jaime smiled. “I think we just found our way to the *Ampere*.”



Dodds and Jaime came over the next day around noon. Both men looked anxious, but Dodds looked especially on edge.

“We’ve learned that the resupplying is moving faster than we anticipated,” Dodds said. “They’ve filed with the port authority to pull out Thursday afternoon.”

“The day after tomorrow,” Taylor said.

“That means we’ll have to attack tomorrow night,” Jack said.

Dodds nodded. “We have the uniforms and cloaks but no key. Apparently the sailors are not allowed to take them off the ship. We’ve secured scuba gear, but I understand you won’t be using it.”

“We think it will be better to use a fishing boat,” I said. “We’ll get close enough to raft over to the *Ampere*.”

“I have already found a black raft,” Jaime said.

“What about the explosives?” Jack asked.

“They’re ready,” Dodds said. “In a backpack with detonators and timers. I’ll go over the timers with all of you later.”

“No need,” Jack said. “I’ll be carrying the explosives.”

Dodd looked at him with an uncomfortable expression. “Just in case something happens to you, it would be best to have a backup.”

Jack nodded. “You’re right.”

“I have chartered the fishing boat,” Jaime said. “We will leave at two thirty a.m. from the north end of the port.”

“Won’t that look suspicious?” Ostin asked. “A fishing boat at night?”

“No,” Jaime said. “Local fishing boats often return late at night.”

“There is one other factor to keep in mind,” Dodds said. “The weather. It’s expected to rain. As long as it doesn’t hamper Michael’s climbing, it could be to our advantage.”

“I’ve never climbed a wet surface,” I said.

“Kylee could do it,” McKenna said.

“How is the rain helpful?” Taylor asked.

“Cloud cover, no moon, poorer visibility,” Dodds replied. “And less chance that someone will be taking a leisurely walk on the deck.” He looked around. “Anything else?”

“Did you arrange for me to talk to my mother?” I asked.

Jaime and Dodds looked at each other. “I’m afraid that will not be possible,” Dodds said.

“Why?” I turned to Jaime. “You promised that I would be able to talk to her.”

“I’m sorry,” Jaime said. “But we have lost communication with the voice.”

“What?”

“You know that we were compromised,” Dodds said. “Things have taken another turn for the worse. Two days ago the Elgen discovered our agent on their boat. We must assume that they now know everything he knows, about the voice, the resistance, everything he knew.”

“Then they know about our plans!” Ostin exclaimed.

“Fortunately we had not yet told him what we were planning to do,” Dodds said. “We were waiting until we knew our exact timing so we could warn him to leave the boat.”

“How did you learn this?” I asked.

“The voice contacted our associate in Bolivia,” Jaime said. “He drove through the night to tell us.”

I looked around at my friends. “So we’re really alone,” I said.

“We always were,” Taylor said.

“At least the day is perfect,” Jack said.

“Why do you say that?” Taylor asked.

“Thursday is Wade’s birthday.”

Dodds looked around at us all. “We’ll leave here at one forty-five a.m. Jaime and I will have everything prepared. I want you to stay up as late as you can tonight. Study the boat plans, party, just try to stay up until dawn. That way you’ll sleep all day and be fresh and ready to go at night.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” Ostin said. “Staying up all night.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“It might be our last night to live.”



Taylor and I lay on the front room couch talking until she fell asleep around nine in the morning. About a half hour after that I heard the garage door open. Jack walked into the front room. He was wet with sweat.

“Michael,” he whispered.

I got up without waking Taylor.

“What’s up?”

He motioned for me to follow him out to the garage. After he’d shut the door behind me, he said, “The plan doesn’t make sense.”

“You’re telling me now?” I said.

“Better now than never.”

“What part doesn’t make sense?”

“It doesn’t take five people to plant an explosive. Just one. If I could get on the boat, I’d do it myself. But I need your help to get on board.” He looked me in the eyes. “We don’t need everyone else.”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. “But we’re a team.”

“That’s no reason to risk their lives,” Jack said. “Think about it. What do we need Ostin for? We don’t need his brains, the plan is already set. He’ll just slow us down. Do you think he can even climb the rope?”

I didn't answer. We both knew he was right.

"Or McKenna? Taylor might be helpful, but is it really worth risking her life? Are you okay with that?"

I frowned. "No."

"I didn't think so. So here's the new plan. We turn off everyone's alarms, meet Jaime outside, and tell him it's just the two of us. You get me on the boat, help me score a key, then once I'm inside you get clear."

"What if you're stopped on the way to the engine room?"

"I blow it."

I just looked at him.

"You heard the man, if the bomb's inside, it's going to take the ship down."

"I can't send you in there alone."

"You're not. I'm sending myself in there alone. What's the difference? I'm going in there anyway."

I shook my head. "I can't let you do this."

"Look, remember in the Starxource plant when you stayed inside and locked the pipe so none of us could go back for you? What was that, huh? It was a calculated risk. You did what you felt was right under the circumstance. And because of it, you saved your mother and the rest of us. And you even got out yourself.

"And what about when Zeus blew the water pipe, knowing it would kill him? This is no different. All I'm asking is that you let me do the same thing."

I shook my head. "Jack, I know you think that Wade's death was your fault. . . ."

"This has nothing to do with Wade's death," he said. "It has to do with your life and everyone else's. I'm expendable, dude."

"No, you're not. Not to me."

"I know. Because you're my friend. And you're a good friend. So let me do this, Michael. Let me do this one good thing. You made that choice in the Starxource plant. Let me make that choice too."

I looked down a moment then said, "I don't like it."

"But you know I'm right," he said.

I breathed out slowly. Finally I said, "Okay. We'll do it your way."

“Thank you, Michael. It’s the right thing.”

“I hope so,” I said.

“It is,” Jack said. “*Semper Fi.*”

I just looked at him sadly. What he didn’t know was that I had no intention of leaving him alone on the boat. “*Semper Fi,*” I said. “*Semper Fi.*”



A few minutes later I crept into Ostin's room. He and McKenna were asleep next to each other. I turned off their alarm. Then I went back out to the couch and lay down next to Taylor. I couldn't sleep. For nearly an hour I just looked at her.

My heart ached. I didn't regret agreeing to Jack's plan—I would never regret saving Taylor's life. I just knew how slim the chances were that I would see her again. My world had changed in the last year in no small part due to Taylor. Having someone care about me and believe in me like she did was as much a power as my electricity was. I thought of writing her a note, but I really didn't know where to begin. Instead, I just cuddled up next to her. It was probably close to noon when I fell asleep.

* * *

Jack woke me. It was dark again. I looked up and he put his finger over his mouth. I lifted Taylor's arm from me, then slowly rolled off the couch to my knees. I paused to look at her one last time. I wondered if I would ever see that beautiful face again. I pushed the thought from my mind. *At least I can guarantee that she will see her home again,* I told myself.

The villa was dark and quiet as I walked out the front door and shut it behind me. Jack was leaning against the porch wall. It was overcast, as Dodds had said it might be, and there were no stars or moon visible.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“One thirty. They’ll be here any minute.” He looked at me. “You ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be. You?”

“I’m ready.”

A few minutes later the lights of the van appeared at the end of the driveway. “Let’s stop them before they get close enough to wake anybody,” Jack said, walking toward the light. We met the van partway down the lane. Jaime was driving and he stopped the van next to us. Jack slid open the door and we both got in.

“Where’s everyone else?” Dodds asked.

“It’s just us,” Jack said.

“That’s not the plan,” Dodds said.

“This is a better plan,” I said. “Two can do it. The others will just get in the way.”

“Everyone agreed to this?” Dodds asked.

“We don’t have time to argue,” Jack said. “Let’s go.”

Dodds looked upset but relented. “All right, it’s your plan. Let’s go.”

Jaime started to put the van into gear then stopped.

Dodds looked back at us. “Where’s everyone else?”

“We just told you,” Jack said.

He squinted. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s just the two of us,” I said. “Come on, let’s go.”

Again, Jaime started to pull the van forward, then stopped.

Dodds turned back. “Where’s everyone else?”

Jack scowled. “What the . . .”

“It’s Taylor,” I said.

I looked out the window to see Taylor storming down the driveway. When she got to the van she threw open the door. “Really? After all we talked about, you still tried to go without me?”

“I just . . .”

“Lied? Conspired?”

“He was just trying to protect you,” Jack said.

“You zip it,” Taylor said. “I already know this was your idea.”

She spun back at me. “Really? This is trust?”

“I’m sorry I tried to leave you out. But I’m not sorry.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means he loves you,” Jack said.

“I said zip it,” Taylor said.

“It means I love you,” I said.

“And that’s why we stay together. We’re not just a couple, Michael, we’re the Electroclan—at least what’s left of it—and that means we stick together through good and bad times. We’ve gotten this far because we’ve stuck together. I know you were trying to protect me, but I didn’t ask to be protected. I asked to be with you.”

“I thought it was the right thing,” I said.

“I know, and part of me loves that you did this. But the right thing is us working together. All of us.” She turned to Jack. “And that means you, too. You don’t have to prove you’re a hero. You’ve proven that so many times I’ve lost count. We all admire and love you, just like Wade did. Don’t take that away from us. Please.”

Jack looked stunned. Then his eyes welled up with tears.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go wake Ostin and McKenna.”



None of us told Ostin and McKenna that we'd tried to leave them behind, and Ostin spent half the drive trying to figure out why his alarm clock hadn't gone off. After just twenty minutes the van pulled off the coastal highway and headed down a long sloped road toward the wide dark bay. As we neared the water, the ships seemed to grow in their immensity, rising before us like great floating mountains. There were lights on the Elgen boats and loading dock, assuring us that they weren't asleep.

As Jaime drove, Dodds turned around to face us. He held up a square, plastic object with a keypad and a digital screen. "This is the explosive's timer. It connects to the detonator in the pack. Once you punch in the code the explosive is activated and cannot be turned off."

"What's the code?" I asked.

"Seventeen, seventeen."

"Just like the radio frequency," I said.

"Remember, once you punch in the code, it cannot be turned off. So do not activate it until you are ready to commit. To set the timer you can either punch in the number of minutes on the keypad or simply push this black button. Each time you push it, it will advance the timer one minute, up to two hours. Like the activation button,

once it is set it cannot be changed. So be sure to give yourself plenty of time to get off the boat. But remember, the more time you allow, the more time they have to find the bomb and dispose of it.”

He handed me a small black tube similar to the one Jaime used to set off his gun sentry. “As you leave the boat, push this button. It will alert us that you are on your way. The raft you will be using has a motor, but do not use it until you are leaving, otherwise they’ll hear you. After you’re off the ship, head straight out to the open sea. We will be watching for you with night-vision binoculars and will pick you up in a speedboat. Any questions so far?”

Ostin asked, “Can the detonators be set off by impact or heat?”

“It would have to be intense heat,” he said. “Like in an open fire. Why?”

“Just in case the timer malfunctions,” Ostin said.

“That won’t be a problem,” Dodds said. He glanced out the side window. “Okay, we are just about there. When we reach the fishing boat, you’ll change into your Elgen uniforms, then cover them with the cloaks and stocking caps. You’ll be completely concealed. I brought gloves for the three of you who glow. I don’t know if you’ll be able to use them as you climb, Michael, you’ll just have to test them.

“When the boat passes behind the *Ampere*, we’ll throw the raft out and stop the boat. Jack will climb in first so he can help the others on. You’ll have just a few seconds to get into the raft. Then the boat will move on, leaving you behind. We’ll come in as close to the *Ampere*’s stern as we can, but you’ll still probably have to paddle about thirty yards.

“As I said, the raft has a motor and will do about ten knots, but do not use it until after you’ve set the bomb and gotten off the ship. Once you reach the *Ampere*, there are magnets to anchor the raft to the hull. They’re very strong magnets, so when it’s time to leave, don’t try to pull them off, just release or cut the line.”

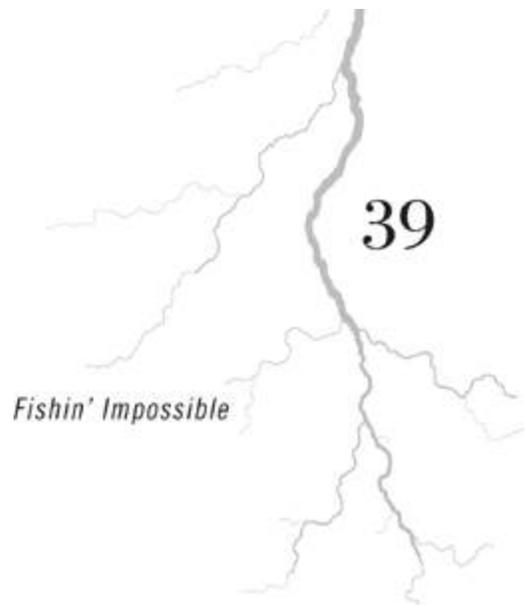
Jack patted his knife. “Got it.”

“Remember, stay quiet, low, and covered. In this darkness you’ll be almost invisible. You know the rest of the plan. Don’t forget to

capture a key. I doubt they'll leave any doors unlocked. Any questions?"

None of us had any.

"Then good luck and Godspeed," he said. "Let's hope we catch Hatch sleeping."



Five minutes later Jaime stopped the van in front of a small, lantern-lit shack with a hand-painted sign: JORGE'S CHARTER FISHING TOURS.

In spite of the hour, an older man walked out of the building to greet us. He and Jaime spoke a bit in Spanish, then Jaime turned to us.

"Everything is ready. Follow me."

All of us except Dodds walked past the shack and down a wood-planked dock to where an old fishing boat was moored. The boat was beige and turquoise. It had an upper platform enclosed in canvas and its fishing lines were still in place. There was a black raft tied to the port side of the boat.

"Isn't that the wrong side for the raft?" Ostin asked Jaime. "The *Ampere* is south of us."

"Yes, but we will first go far out to sea, then turn back and come in from the other direction as if we are just returning from fishing, so we will pass the boat on the starboard side."

"Clever," Ostin said.

We climbed on board and walked through the cabin to the open back of the boat. It smelled of saltwater and fish. On the floor were

canvas bags with our initials marked in pen.

“Your uniforms,” Jaime said. “Get dressed.”

We all put on the sailor uniforms, which fit perfectly.

“They did a good job,” Taylor said. “We look like Elgen sailors.” Then she added, “Actually, I’ve never seen one.”

Jaime said, “Put on the cloaks.”

I pulled the cloak from the bottom of the bag and slid my arms through it. The fabric was black and lightweight, like vinyl, though softer and more opaque. I looked up at everyone else. We looked like we were wearing Halloween witch costumes.

“Michael, check this out,” Ostin said, leaning over the back of the boat. I walked back to see what he was looking at. Painted on the boat’s stern was the name: *Fishin’ Impossible*.

“Doesn’t exactly inspire confidence,” I said.

Dodds walked up to the side of the boat carrying a large black vinyl backpack. “Jack,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Jack said.

“Your explosives,” Dodds said, handing the pack over the side of the boat.

“How sensitive are they?” Jack asked.

“These are pretty stable,” he said. “But don’t push your luck.”

Jack slid the pack over his shoulders just to get a sense of its weight. “About fifty pounds,” he said. “No problem.” He set the pack on the ground and unzipped the top flap, exposing the detonator. The digital screen glowed light green.

“What’s the code?” Dodds quizzed.

“Seventeen, seventeen,” Jack replied. He looked up. “That’s how old Wade would be today.”

The boat’s engine started, and the air smelled of gasoline and exhaust as the propeller churned and gurgled beneath us.

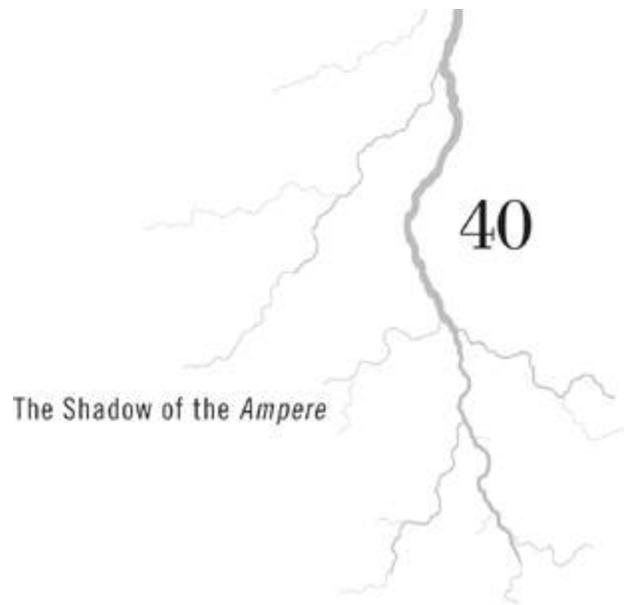
“It is time to go,” Jaime said. He began untying the rope holding us to the dock.

“Aren’t you coming?” I asked Dodds, who was still on the dock.

“No. We can’t put all our eggs in one basket, and I believe I am close to reestablishing radio contact with the resistance.” He pushed

the boat away from the dock with his foot. “But I will see you all shortly.”

For just a moment his words hung in the air like a promise. The fishing boat sputtered in its own veil of exhaust as it slowly pulled away from the dock. Then it rotated until we were facing the sea. The old man pushed down on the throttle and we lurched forward, headed out into the cold darkness.



It started raining as the old boat chugged out to sea. Taylor slid up next to me and took my hand in hers. "I'm cold," she said.

I put my arm around her.

"You know, when we attacked the Starxource plant we weren't together," she said. "This time we're together."

I looked at her. "Our first date," I said.

She grinned.

"Are you scared?" I asked.

"Terrified."

"Me too."

"Do you think we'll make it back?"

"Of course we will."

"Really?"

"I can't afford to doubt," I said. "My mom used to say that faith and fear can't exist simultaneously in the mind any more than light and dark can exist simultaneously in the same room."

"Your mom is smart."

"I know. I wished I could have spoken to her once more. . . ." I stopped myself.

Taylor squeezed my hand. "You'll get the chance," she said.
A moment later Taylor looked over at Jack. "How are you feeling?"
"Wet," he said.

* * *

Suddenly the whining of the engine stopped and the boat slowed and pitched forward until the surging of the waves almost rocked us out of our seats. Jaime came out of the cab with a large coil of black rope over his shoulder. "We are turning back now. It is time to put on your masks and gloves." As we donned our coverings, Jaime walked over and inspected the ropes on the raft, then turned back to us. "Remember you must go fast. Jack first, then Taylor, Michael, Ostin, and McKenna. When you are all in I will hand down the pack and rope. If we get near the boat and are discovered, we will abort."

"About?" Taylor said.

"I think he means abort," I said.

Jaime went back to the cabin. The boat turned around and headed back toward the lights of the shore. I stood and walked up to the front of the boat.

"Jaime."

"Sí, Mr. Michael."

"I need to ask you a favor."

He looked at me seriously. "Anything."

"If we don't make it, I want you to tell my mother what we were trying to do."

"Sí. Of course."

"Also Ostin's and Taylor's families. Taylor's family doesn't even know she's electric."

"You will come back, Mr. Michael. But if something happens, I promise that they will know the truth."

"Thank you," I said.

"You will come back," he said again.

* * *

When I returned to my seat, the Elgen fleet was in view. The *Ampere* was sandwiched in between the *Watt* and the *Volta*. Fortunately the *Faraday*, the biggest boat of the Elgen fleet, was on the far north side of the fleet. It stuck so far out into the bay that had it been next to the *Ampere* we never would have been able to get close.

No one spoke. Jaime came back with us, looking at the fleet through his binoculars. The fishing boat made a wide, elliptical sweep of the bay, then drifted in toward the shore, carefully edging itself closer to the fleet.

The first of the Elgen boats we passed was the *Ohm*, which in spite of the hour had all its lights on as men and forklifts scurried on its deck filling it with supplies. The next boat was the *Tesla*, then the *Joule*, which was completely dark and stranger looking than I had imagined. Next we reached the powerhouse of the fleet, the *Watt*. The battle cruiser was gunship gray with large cannons pointing out toward the sea behind her.

Our boat slowed still more as we crossed beneath the shadow of the cruiser toward the *Ampere*. I turned back and looked up at the boats, wondering if we were being watched. All I could see were a few cabin lights and darkness. Jaime put down his binoculars, then moved over to the raft and waved to Jack to come help him. They quickly unlashed the raft, laying it flat at our feet on the floor of the boat.

When we were in the shadow of the *Ampere* the engine cut back even more, then slowed as the captain put the boat in idle.

“Now,” Jaime said.

The rest of us stood as Jaime and Jack heaved the raft over the port side, leaving just the front towrope attached. Jack jumped over the side, disappearing from our view. Jaime handed over two paddles, then turned to us. “*Rápidamente.*”

Taylor climbed over first, helped down into the raft by Jack, followed by me, Ostin, then finally McKenna, who I hadn’t heard speak since we’d boarded.

“Mr. Michael,” Jaime said. He tossed me the coil of black rope, then handed the explosives to Jack. Then he pulled out a knife and cut our towrope.

“*Buena suerte, amigos. Go with God.*”

The boat shifted back into gear and was soon clear of us, leaving us alone and exposed near the *Ampere's* massive stern.

"Paddle," Jack said. He took one paddle and handed me the other, and we paddled our way toward the boat until her stern rose above us like a great canyon wall.

"Get the magnets ready," I said to Ostin.

Ostin lifted one magnet, then handed the other to McKenna. The magnets were fist-size and round with a small loop through the back where a strap ran through them, connecting them to the raft. The strap was about six feet long but was designed to be cinched tight, to snug the raft up against the boat.

When we were twenty feet out I set down my paddle and reached out toward the boat and magnified. My magnetism was stronger than I thought it would be and our raft was drawn so quickly to the hull that we hit against the *Ampere* hard enough that I almost flipped the raft over.

"Sorry," I whispered.

Ostin and McKenna stuck their magnets against the hull, which connected with an uncomfortably loud clang, then pulled the straps until the raft was tight against the boat.

"My turn," I said.

Taylor leaned forward and kissed me, gently cupping my cheeks in her hands. "Be careful."

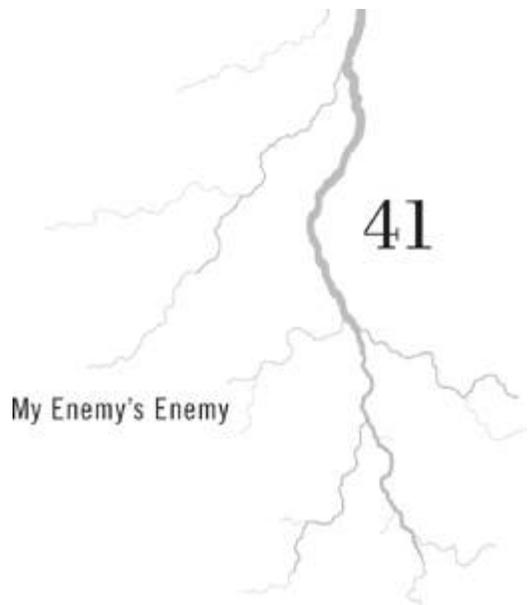
"I'll see you soon."

I slid the rope coil over my head and one shoulder, then awkwardly stood in the leaning raft, putting my hands against the side and magnifying. The hull was cold and wet but easy to grab, as if the water actually enhanced my magnetism. "Watch for the rope," I said. I threw my knees against the hull and began to climb.

With all the adrenaline pumping through my body I reached the top in less than ten minutes. As I got near the railing of the deck, I stopped and listened for guards. I didn't hear anything but the patter of rain, so I crept up a little farther so I could peer over the side. There was no one. I spotted a camera mounted high up on the wall facing down toward me. The camera appeared stationary, but the red light on top of the camera indicated that it was active. I wished Zeus

was there to blow it out, and it occurred to me that I could take it out just as well. Throwing lightning balls was too risky, as a flash of lightning would almost certainly catch a guard's eye. I could climb the wall beneath it and short it out; I just needed a little luck coming over the side railing.

But first I needed to get rid of the rope. I magnetized the lower half of my body, then took the end of the rope and tied it around the deck's outside railing with a figure eight knot. I looked down. The raft was completely invisible to me and all I could see below was an occasional whitecap in the sea. I took the coil from around my neck and dropped it into the darkness below. The rope almost immediately tensed. Jack was on his way up. I clung to the side of the boat and waited.



It took Jack even less time to climb up than it had me. He was strong enough that he wasn't even using his legs but swinging them back and forth as he grasped the rope hand over hand and pulled himself up. He stopped when he was next to me. He looked at me clinging to the side of the boat. "You look like a spider," he said.

"I feel like one," I said.

He looked up. "Anyone topside?"

"No. But there's a camera."

"Have you tried putting it out?"

"I was waiting for you," I said. "Give me a second." I climbed back up and peered over the side again, then, still wearing my cloak, flung myself over on top of the deck. Sidling up against the interior wall, I quickly stole beneath the camera, then climbed up, grabbed it, and pulsed. The red light on top of it went out.

I leaned back over the rail. "It's out."

"Good," he said. "Taylor's on her way up."

I looked over the side. "You can see her?"

"No. I can feel her on the rope."

He climbed the rest of the way up the rope, then grabbed the railing and pulled himself over.

“Let’s pull her up,” he said.

We both grabbed the rope and began pulling. Taylor suddenly came into view. We lifted her all the way to the railing. “Thanks,” she said, panting.

Jack grabbed on to her and pulled her up and over the side. Then we threw the rope back down.

A minute later we felt the rope tense. All three of us grabbed it and quickly pulled. McKenna practically flew up. When she was a few feet from the railing Jack grabbed her and pulled her over as well, then we tossed the rope back down.

“Ostin knows to tie the pack to the rope, right?”

Jack nodded. “I reminded him.”

We felt the rope tense, and we quickly pulled. The rope was so light that it almost felt like there wasn’t anything on it.

“I see the pack,” McKenna said. We quickly pulled the explosives up and over the side. Jack untied the pack and threw the rope back over. It was nearly a minute before we felt it tense.

“Let’s pull,” I said.

With all four of us pulling, we lifted Ostin up in just five minutes. When he got to the top he looked pale and terrified, and he grabbed on to the railing as if for his life. Jack and I each grabbed one of his arms and pulled him over.

“That was horrific,” he said.

“The fun’s just beginning,” Jack said.

We took off our cloaks and threw them over the side of the boat, then Jack pulled the pack on over his shoulder.

“We need a key,” Ostin said.

“Let’s try the door first,” I said. “Just in case they left it unlocked.”

We found the door where Dodds’s plans said it would be. As we expected, it was locked. There was another camera near the door. I climbed the wall next to it and put it out as well.

“You guys wait here,” I said. “Taylor and I will find a key.”

We walked around the back of the boat. We saw a pair of shoes sticking out from behind a tender. Then we saw an expulsion of

smoke.

“Someone’s sneaking a cigarette,” Taylor whispered.

We walked up to him. Smoking was against the Elgen code, and the young Italian sailor was horrified to see us.

“Hey, I’m just . . .” He looked at Taylor. “You’re a girl.”

“I know,” she said. She rebooted him. Then, as he sat there, grinning stupidly, I pulsed and knocked him out. Then I reached over and took his key and the ID he wore around his neck.

“Should we throw him overboard?” Taylor asked.

“Tempting,” I said. “But too loud.”

“What do we do if he wakes up?”

I pulsed my finger, then wrote into his uniform: *DEATH TO HATCH.*

“That will keep him from fraternizing,” I said.

I shocked him one more time, then we hurried back to the others. They were gone.

“Where’d they go?” Taylor asked.

As we walked up to the door, it suddenly opened. “Come on,” Jack said.

“How did you get the door open?”

“Him,” Ostin said, pointing to a sailor lying face-first on the ground.

“You punched him?” I asked Jack.

He nodded.

“Feel good?”

“More than I can say, brother.”

We hurried in single file down three flights of stairs. Just as Dodds had warned, the bottom level was dark and noisy with the dull, steady roar of the *Ampere*’s motors.

As we moved up the hallway to the engine room, someone at the opposite end of the corridor pointed at us and shouted. The man wasn’t dressed as a sailor but as an Elgen guard.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“I couldn’t hear him,” Taylor said.

He pointed a gun at us.

“Ostin and I will see what he wants,” I said. “Before he sounds the alarm. The rest of you stay here.” I turned to Taylor. “I might need a

little reboot.”

“I’ll watch for it,” she said.

Ostin and I walked toward the end of the corridor. As we approached the guard grew more livid. He shouted, “No one is allowed stern entry on level one! Are you crazy or stupid?”

“Neither,” I said. “I’m electric.” I pulsed and he collapsed to the ground.

“You’re getting better at that,” Ostin said.

We handcuffed the guard and took his weapons. Then we looked around. Just thirty feet in front of us were what looked like jail cells. “What’s that?” I asked.

“The brig,” Ostin said. “It was on the blueprints.”

“Sorry, I didn’t get around to memorizing them.”

“I did,” Ostin said.

We walked toward them. Two of the cells were occupied. One had an Elgen guard lying unconscious on the floor in a pool of blood. The other was jammed full of people, with a woman hanging upside down against the bars, her long hair touching the floor.

For a moment Ostin and I and the cell’s occupants just gazed at one another. Then a graying, middle-aged Italian man said in a low voice, “You’re not Elgen.”

“That’s for sure,” Ostin said.

“You’re Michael Vey.”

“Bingo,” Ostin said.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m Chairman Schema.”

“He’s the chairman of Elgen Inc.,” Ostin said.

“Why is he in his own jail?”

“Hatch,” Ostin said. “Remember, he’s taken over.”

I looked at the woman hanging upside down. “Who is she?”

“She’s dead,” Schema said. His gruff voice didn’t conceal his grief. “She sacrificed her life for mine.”

“She was one of the board members,” one of the women said. “We’re all board members. Hatch imprisoned us.”

Schema looked into my eyes. “Please let us out.”

“Why would I do that?” I said. “You belong in there. You’re as much my enemy as Hatch is.”

“That’s not true,” Schema said. “Hatch is *all* of our enemy. We directed him to let you and your mother go. He rebelled against us.”

“It’s true,” a man in the back said. “That’s why we’re in here.”

“I’m not letting you go,” I said. “And we’re wasting time. Come on, Ostin.” I turned to go.

“He’s going to kill us,” a woman said. “Please, have mercy. I beg you, Michael. We tried to save you.”

Something about her plea stopped me. I turned back. “What will you do if I let you out?”

Schema said, “We’ll take the company back from Hatch.”

“After we blow up the boat there will be no Hatch.”

“Then I hope you succeed,” Schema said.

I looked at Ostin. He shrugged.

“But if he survives . . . ,” Schema said. “Hatch has grown too powerful. No one knows what he’s capable of.”

“We do,” I said.

“I know this organization. I know where the money is. I know the Elgen weaknesses. I can stop him. Let me have my revenge.”

“Revenge against Hatch?”

“Yes,” he said. “Against Hatch.”

I turned to Ostin. “What do you think?” I whispered.

“My enemy’s enemy is my friend,” he whispered back. “Besides, they could be the distraction we need.”

I looked at them, then said, “All right, we’ll let you go. But if you betray us, there will be no mercy. I will personally barbecue you.” I looked around. “Where’s the cell key?”

“It’s an electric key,” Schema said. “The guard has it around his neck.”

Ostin took the cell key from the guard and opened the cell door. As each of them stepped out, I melted the bands from their wrists. When Schema was free, he said, “Please help me get her down.”

I looked at the woman. “All right.”

As he wrapped his arms around her, I grabbed the bands on her feet and melted them. Schema gently laid her body on the floor. He

knelt down next to her. "I'm so sorry, Judith," he said. "He will pay for what he's done." Schema looked up, his eyes wet. "Thank you, Michael."

"You should get off the boat as quickly as possible," Ostin said. "It's not going to be here much longer."

I took the guard's gun, magnetic key, and utility belt and gave them to Schema. "This might help."

"Do you know a safe way out?" one of the women asked.

"Go that way," I said, pointing down the corridor. "Take the stairs to the main deck. There's a rope on the port side you can climb down."

"Don't take our raft," Ostin added. "Just swim to shore."

"Are you leaving with us?" she asked.

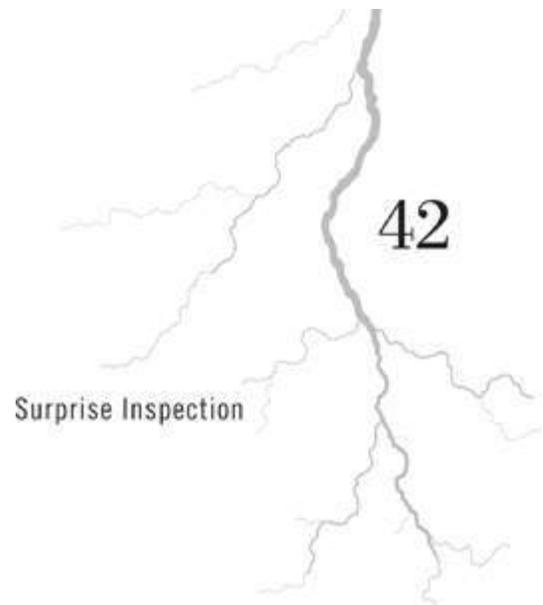
"Not yet," I said. "There's something we need to do."

Together we moved back down the corridor toward the stern stairwell, Ostin and I bringing up the rear. As we approached the engine room Jack, Taylor, and McKenna stepped out in front of them, blocking their way. "Where are you going?" Jack demanded.

"We're letting them go," I shouted over the motor's hum.

"Sorry, didn't see you," Jack said. He stepped aside. "I recommend a speedy exit."

As the freed board members climbed the stairwell, I shouted to the others, "Let's get this over with."



The engine room door was constructed of inch-thick metal with a large glass portal that gave those inside a clear view of the corridor. I grasped the handle and slowly spun it until it opened. Not surprisingly, there was an armed guard stationed near the entrance. He immediately turned to us, his hand hovering near his sidearm.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Ostin stepped forward. “Seaman Liss, first class,” he said. “The admiral sent us down for a surprise inspection.”

“I wasn’t informed of this,” the man said.

“Hence the *surprise* . . .,” Ostin said.

The man stared at him. “I received no notice of an inspection,” he said.

“Perhaps you don’t grasp the concept of *surprise*,” Ostin said.

“You’re not authorized to be here,” he said. “I’m alerting security.” He reached for his radio, but Taylor rebooted him. His expression went blank and for a moment he just stared at the radio as if trying to remember why he was holding it. He blinked several times, then looked back at us. “Who are you?”

“You were taking us to the engineer,” I said.

He still looked confused. "Sorry, I . . ." He looked at us all and nodded. "This way."

The *Ampere's* engine room wasn't anything like I had imagined it would be. I'd never seen an engine room, outside of black-and-white photographs of old steam ships with glowing furnaces fed by men with soot-blackened faces shoveling from coal scuttles. The *Ampere's* engine room was about as far from that as possible. The room was brightly lit with stark white walls and white paneled ceilings with thick chrome pipes running both vertically and horizontally. The ship's engines, four of them, were mounted in the middle of the floor with chrome pipes leading into them from different angles. The floor was made of steel plating, forged with diamond patterns for better traction.

The engineer was standing near a bank of gauges and switches. He didn't look any happier to see us than the guard had. He snapped at the guard, "What are these sailors doing in here?"

"Dr. Hatch sent us," Jack said.

"*Admiral* Hatch," Ostin corrected. "Surprise inspection."

"Elgen protocol does not allow surprise inspections," the engineer said.

"Exactly," Ostin said. "Surprise."

He looked us over, then said, "You all have the same serial number." His expression changed. "You're not Elgen." Suddenly he reached for his sidearm. I was about to surge when Taylor rebooted him. He grabbed his forehead, crying out with pain. "Ah . . ."

"Tell all your men to line up against that wall," I said.

He looked up at me, pain still evident on his face. "Why would I do that?"

I glanced at Taylor, and she rebooted him again. This time the man screamed out with pain, fell to one knee, then to his side, crying out as he hit the floor. Then he went silent.

Taylor was as surprised as any of us. "What happened?"

"I think you just gave him an aneurysm," Ostin said.

"Is he dead?" McKenna asked.

"Does it matter?" Jack said.

Just then two other crew members approached us. They looked at the prone engineer, then back at us. “What happened?”

“He fainted,” Ostin said.

“Who are you?”

Before Taylor could reboot them, I pulsed, dropping them both to the ground. “How many more are there down here?” I asked.

“There are two working on that engine over there,” Taylor said, pointing to the farthest engine near the back of the room. “Jack and I can get them.” She looked at him. “Ready?”

Jack lay the backpack down. “Let’s get them.”

They walked over to the men.

“That makes six crew,” Ostin said. “That’s about right for a night shift.”

“We need to get these guys out of the way,” I said. I pointed to a small door. “What’s that room?”

“It’s a head,” Ostin said. “The bathroom.”

“We’ll lock them in there.”

The bathroom door opened inward and Ostin, McKenna, and I carried the four men—the two crew members, the engineer, and guard—inside and stacked them on top of one another. As we lay the last man on top, Taylor and Jack came around the corner. Jack was dragging two men by their feet.

“Put them in there,” I said.

Jack dragged them to the bathroom, then lifted the men and threw them on top of the others. I pulled the door shut.

“How do we lock it from the outside?” Taylor asked.

“Like this,” Ostin said. He walked across the room, grabbed the guard’s rifle, then came back and wedged it between the door’s handle and the doorjamb.

“That will hold them,” he said.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s plant the explosives and get out of here.”

“Where should I put them?” Jack asked.

“It shouldn’t matter,” Ostin said. “That much explosive will obliterate everything within two hundred feet. But generally speaking, the tighter the fit the better.”

“But hide it,” Taylor said. “In case someone comes down here after we’re gone.”

“How about back here,” Jack said, wedging the pack behind one of the engines. “They won’t see it.”

“Bonus,” Ostin said. “That looks like a fuel line running across the wall next to it.”

“How long are you setting the timer for?” I asked.

“What do you think?” Jack asked.

“I’d say thirty minutes,” Ostin said.

“You’d better make it forty,” I said. “Just in case.”

“All right,” Jack said. “I’m activating it. Everyone ready?”

“Do it,” Taylor said.

Jack pushed four buttons. The timer emitted a long, steady tone, then stopped. “We’re live.”

“Let’s keep it that way,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Suddenly an alarm went off outside the engine room, reverberating loudly down the corridor.

“What is that?” Taylor asked.

“Maybe they’ve discovered the board’s escape,” Ostin said.

“We better get out of here fast,” I said.

Suddenly a voice boomed from a speaker box mounted below a surveillance camera. “It’s too late for that, Vey.”

I’d recognize that voice anywhere. It belonged to Hatch.



“Why do I bother looking for you, Vey, when you just can’t keep away from me? Is it my charisma? My animal magnetism?”

“Your animal smell,” Ostin said.

“Ostin,” Hatch said. “I didn’t notice you. But I’m sure you’re accustomed to being overlooked. I appreciate you giving me another chance to kill you.”

“You know, I was the one who figured out how to blow up your Starxource plant,” he said. “I hope you appreciated that, too.”

“Yes, the Peruvian government will be happy for that confession. So let me explain your situation to you. You are pinned down on the bottom level of a boat with only one corridor out, two tiny portals that Ostin couldn’t fit his arm through, and more than a hundred armed guards crowding both sides of the hallway. Checkmate. It’s over. There is no way off this boat.”

“Check the corridor!” I shouted to Jack.

Jack walked to the door and looked out its window, then turned back to me. “Guards in both directions.”

“You didn’t trust me?” Hatch said.

“Yeah, imagine that,” I replied.

“You know how I like making deals, Michael. So here’s a deal for you. We’re in a bit of a hurry, so if you just walk out of the engine room and surrender, I’ll give you a relatively painless death by firing squad.”

“That’s a great deal,” I said. “Why wouldn’t I take that?”

“It’s the best you’ll get, Vey. Which is pretty generous for a truce breaker.”

“I broke a truce with an evil, sadistic, psychopathic liar. I’m not losing sleep over that.”

“I’m not a psychopath,” Hatch said. “But you’re right, I was lying. What we’re really going to do is strap you down, paralyze you with toxin from the puffer fish, then dissect you while you’re still alive so we can learn what is making your electricity grow. And then we’ll do the same to your girlfriend.”

“You’d have to take us alive to do that,” I said. “And that’s not going to happen.”

“I disagree. And here’s why. Either way, you die. But if you surrender, I’ll let your little buddy Ostin go home to his mommy.”

Ostin shook his head. “They won’t let me go, Michael.” Then he shouted toward the camera, “Do you know what you are, Hatch? You’re a skid mark on the underwear of humanity.”

“Remind me to cut out your tongue,” Hatch said. “But back to my deal. Ostin goes free, sans tongue, and, added bonus, we won’t torture your girlfriend.”

I looked at Taylor. Even though she looked terrified, she also shook her head. “He’s a liar, Michael.”

“You have sixty seconds to decide.”

“Just a minute,” I said.

“That’s what I just said,” Hatch replied.

I walked over to the surveillance camera and threw a lightning ball at it. The light went out.

“You just wasted twenty seconds,” Hatch said.

Sixty seconds. It was too late to change the explosive’s time, but I remembered what Dodds had said about setting it off. I retrieved the pack and brought it over to Ostin and McKenna. Speaking softly so Hatch couldn’t hear, I said, “We need to be able to blow it quickly.”

“You want me to light it?” McKenna asked.

“It needs intense heat,” Ostin said. “You would have to flare.”

“I can do that,” she said.

“Only if it comes to that.” I handed her the pack. She and Ostin sat down on the ground with it.

I walked back to the voice box. “Here’s a deal for you, Hatch, you sludge-breath. If your guards come within ten feet of this room, we’ll blow our explosive and everyone on board dies.”

“It’s what they call a Mexican standoff!” Ostin shouted.

There was a pause, then Hatch said, “Clever bluff, but you don’t have explosives.”

“Of course we do, you human litter box. Why else would we have boarded this tub if not to sink it?”

Another pause. “So let’s say you do have an incendiary device. I don’t think you have it in you to detonate it.”

“You know me better than that, you dog-faced man-worm. I mocked you when you threatened to feed me to rats. Do you think I’m afraid to die now?”

“No. In fact, if I were you, I would have already killed myself. I just don’t think you have the courage to kill your friends.”

“Use your brain, you baboon butt!” Ostin shouted. “It’s the only logical choice you’ve given us. We can die slowly of torture with you mocking us, or we die quickly, save the world, and take you with us. I think even you could figure that out.”

Hatch didn’t answer.

But Hatch might have been right. I wasn’t sure that I had the courage. I knew that I couldn’t commit for my friends. I looked at Taylor. She was trembling. “What do you think?”

“Ostin’s right. He’ll kill us anyway.”

“McKenna?”

She swallowed. “Just tell me when.”

I looked over at Jack.

“I say we make our deaths count for something.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay.” I turned back to McKenna. “On my word . . .”

“What’s your decision?” Hatch asked.

“We’re unanimous. Come and get us!” I shouted. Taylor gripped my hand tightly. After a minute I said, “Jack, what’s going on?”

“No one’s advancing,” he said.

“The door’s locked?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Let us know when they’re ten feet away.”

“They’re probably trying to figure out a way to poison us through the vents,” Ostin said.

I pointed to the voice box.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Hatch said. “Thanks for the idea.”

“Sorry,” Ostin said.

“Jack,” I said. “Tell me when.” He nodded.

“Now what?” Taylor asked.

“We wait.” I took her hand and we walked over and sat down next to Ostin and McKenna. I raked my free hand back through my hair. “I guess Abigail was right after all.”

Taylor shook her head. “No, she wasn’t. We’re going to blow this thing and the world will be safer.”

Suddenly, something came to mind. “I don’t believe it.”

“What?”

“Back in the jungle the chief of the Amacarra saw all this. He said, ‘over the water a choice would come to me’—that I would have to choose the lives of the ones I loved or the lives of many I don’t know.” I looked at Taylor. “I guess the guy knew our fate all along.” I took a deep breath. “So what do you want to do with the last ten minutes of our lives?”



“They’re coming! Thirty feet!” Jack shouted.

“Are you ready?” I asked McKenna.

She looked frightened but nodded.

I looked at Ostin. I could also see the fear in his eyes. In spite of my own fear, I wanted to comfort him. “At least we probably won’t feel anything,” I said.

“We won’t,” he said stoically. “Water-gel explosives can reach temperatures upward of thirty-five hundred degrees Fahrenheit in point zero, zero, two seconds. We’ll be incinerated before our brains can register pain.”

“That’s good to know,” I said. I put my hand on his shoulder. “At least we’re here together. I’m glad for that.”

“Me too,” Ostin said. “But all things being equal, I’d rather be clogging.”

In spite of my fear I grinned. He smile back at me. I took a deep breath, then turned back to Taylor. Her eyes were filled with tears. She took my hand and said, “Do you know what I hate the most about this?”

“Dying?” I said.

“I mean besides that.” She wiped a tear from her cheek. “I hate that my parents will never know what happened to me.”

“Jaime will tell them,” I said. “He promised me he would.”

“Good,” she said sadly. She took a deep breath, then looked deeply into my eyes. “I know we’re only fifteen, and just kids, but I just want you to know that . . . I would have married you.”

I put my hand on her cheek. “I would have asked.”

“Twenty feet!” Jack shouted.

She softly sighed, putting her cheek up against mine. “Why aren’t you ticking?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because there’s nothing to worry about anymore.”

Across from us McKenna said to Ostin, “You need to move away from me. I’m going to get really hot.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ostin said. “I’m going to die anyway.”

“It will hurt,” she said.

“Just for a few seconds,” he replied.

“Fifteen feet!” Jack shouted. Then he said, “We’re coming, Wade.”

I pulled Taylor into me.

“Ten feet!” Jack shouted. “Blow it!”

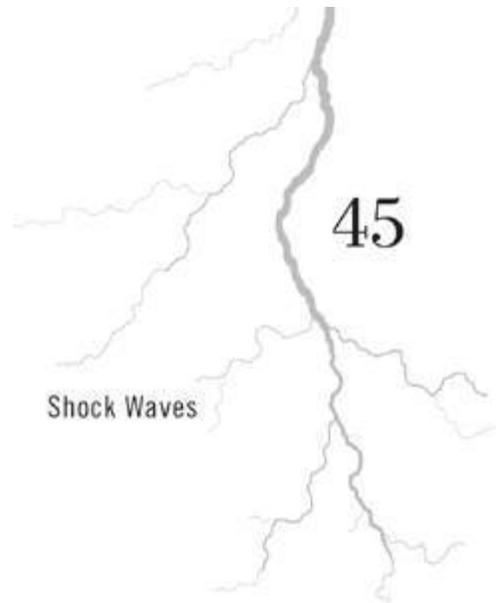
McKenna took a deep breath, then said to Ostin, “Good-bye.” Then she closed her eyes and her skin began to turn red.

Taylor and I embraced each other tightly. “I’m so scared,” she said.

“I’ve got you,” I said.

“I love you, Michael.”

That’s when we heard the explosion.



The *Ampere* rocked from the explosion's shock wave. At first I thought the massive blast was from our own explosive, but when I realized that we were all still there, I figured that something else must have happened.

"Holy crap!" Jack shouted. "What was that?"

Sirens from the dock began wailing.

Ostin ran to the portal and looked out. "It's the *Watt*!" he shouted.

I ran over to look for myself.

From the light of the fires I could see that the top deck of the *Watt* was mostly blown off and smoke and fire was billowing up into the black sky. What was left of the boat was disappearing into the sea.

"It's sinking," I said.

"Michael, you're glowing," Taylor said.

I looked down. My skin was glowing a pale white and electricity was sparking between my legs and arms and fingers. "What's happening?"

"What should I do with the bomb?" McKenna shouted. She had cooled down, but her arms were still wrapped around the explosive.

"Hold on," I said. "Jack, where are the guards?"

"Mostly on their faces!" he shouted.

Suddenly a massive bolt of lightning burst past our door, illuminating the engine room like the flash of an arc welder. Then there was another.

“The corridor’s clear!” Jack shouted. “The guards are down.”

Suddenly someone pounded on the engine room door. Tessa’s face appeared in the window. “Come on, you idiots!” she shouted. “Let’s go!”

Jack opened the door. “Where’d you come from?”

“Someplace a lot better than this,” she said.

Then Zeus stuck his head in the doorway. “Hey, where did you get the nifty sailor duds?”

“You came back,” I said.

“You thought we’d let you have all the fun? Let’s get out of here.”

“Wait,” I said. “McKenna, how much time do we have on the bomb?”

McKenna pulled back the flap. “Eighteen minutes and twelve seconds.”

“Hide it!”

“I’ll do it,” Ostin said. He took the pack to the back of the engine room and shoved it behind the engine, then returned. “We’re good.”

* * *

Outside the engine room door a handful of guards started to rally.

“Tessa!” I shouted. “A little help.”

“You got it,” she said.

“I’ve got them,” Taylor said.

I looked back out and the guards were standing in the corridor, looking around in different directions. I made a lightning ball about the size of a watermelon and threw it down the hall. It blew up around them like a grenade, scattering them like bowling pins.

“*Vámonos!*” Tessa said.

We followed Zeus and Tessa out of the engine room, then back up the utility stairway to the deck, which was crowded with sailors who had been woken by the *Watt*’s explosion and had rushed to the deck to see what was happening. In the darkness and commotion, few of

them even noticed us, and Zeus and I easily took care of those who did. We ran to the side of the boat where we had left our rope.

Zeus looked over the railing. "I hate water," he said.

"Someone better go down first," I said, "and make sure our raft's still there."

"We brought a boat," Tessa said.

"I'll go first," McKenna said. "I'll flash if it's okay."

She grabbed the rope and slid down into the darkness. A moment later we saw a flash of light.

"That's your cue," Jack said. "Go!"

Zeus climbed over, followed by Tessa, Ostin, and Jack, leaving just Taylor and me.

"Your turn," I said to Taylor.

"No," she said. "I'm not taking another chance of you staying behind."

There was no time for discussion, so I climbed over the railing. I grabbed the rope and slid down a few yards, then looked back up. "Coming?"

Taylor grabbed the railing and was throwing her leg over the side when someone grabbed her. It was one of the Elgen guards. Taylor tried to reboot him, but he was wearing a copper helmet. "Caught you," he said.

"Catch this," I said. I threw a lightning ball at him, striking him on the copper of his helmet. Electricity sparked and sizzled around on his head, then he fell forward unconscious, dropping Taylor over the side of the boat.

"Michael!" she shouted.

I jumped out and grabbed her—both of us free-falling in the dark. Then I reached out toward the *Ampere* and magnetized, which pulled us up against the boat's metal hull. I amped up my magnetism until we came to a sliding stop about twenty feet from the water. Below us was an idling speedboat with all our friends. Jaime was at the wheel.

"That was cool," I heard Ostin say.

"I think my heart just stopped," Taylor said.

"Come on!" Jack shouted. "We only have four minutes to get clear!"

I reached over and grabbed the rope, and handed it to Taylor. "Go."

She slid down the rope until she was low enough that Jack reached up and grabbed her, helping her into the boat. I reduced my magnetism and slid down the hull until I was just a few feet above the boat. Jack grabbed my hand and pulled me in, then shouted to Jaime, “We’re all here! Go, go, go!”

“Everyone hold on,” Jaime said. He leaned on the throttle and the boat shot forward out to sea. By the time Jaime cut back on the throttle the *Ampere* looked like a toy boat in the distance.

I looked around the crowded speedboat. Everyone was there except for Abigail. I smiled at Ian. He just shook his head. “Michael, my man, you know how to make trouble.”

“And you know how to find it,” I replied.

“We have thirty seconds,” Jack said.

We all looked back to watch the explosion. Jack started counting down and we all joined with him. “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one . . .” Nothing.

“It didn’t blow,” Jack said.

“Did you set the timer right?” Ostin asked.

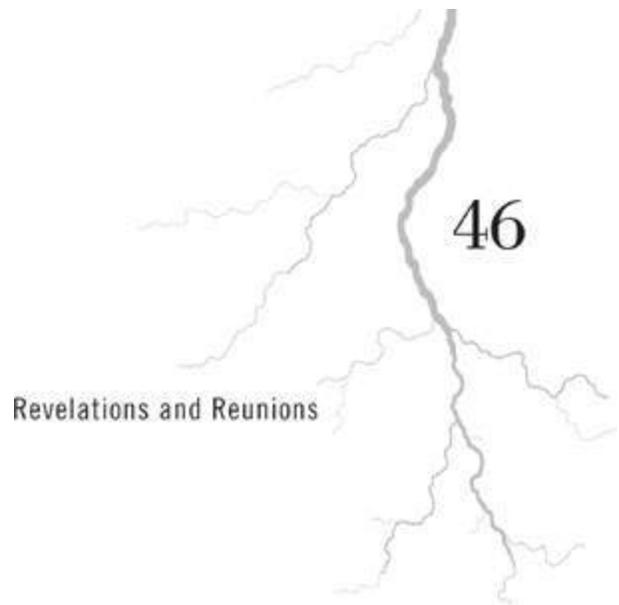
“I did exactly what Dodds told me to do,” Jack said. “You saw the detonator, it was counting down.”

“Maybe they disarmed it,” Taylor said.

Suddenly there was a massive explosion. Even as far away as we were, the sound made my ears ring, reverberating throughout the bay and throwing up tons of shredded debris that showered down on the shore and water. The sky turned orange and yellow as a giant fireball engulfed the *Ampere*. There were two more explosions; the third one was even larger than the first, and the ship broke in two and collapsed into the sea.

“We did it!” Taylor shouted.

“*Veni, vidi, vici!*” Ostin shouted. “We came, we saw, we kicked Elgen butt!” He shook his fist at the boat. “You’re shark chum now, Hatch. You stinking, maniac, sicko freak of nature. You’re shark chum.” He turned to me, out of breath. “Man, I hated that guy.”



For several minutes Jaime just stared at the burning wreckage of the *Ampere*, as if he were in a trance. Our speedboat started to rock more as the waves from the explosion's shock waves caught up to us. The first streaks of dawn had begun to brighten the indigo sky. Set against the gradient horizon, the *Ampere's* orange-red flames and sparkling cinders looked oddly beautiful.

Then Jaime said, "You did it, *hermanos*." He turned back to us. "We now must go before the *guardacostas* arrives."

"Dodds is about a mile up the coast," Ian said. "It looks safe."

"You know Dodds?" I asked.

"How do you think we got here?" Ian replied.

"Everyone hold on," Jaime said, and he hit the throttle again. The boat lunged forward, gaining speed until we were bouncing from crest to crest. I looked over at Zeus. He was wearing a hoodie and wrapped completely in towels, sitting on the floor in the center near the front of the boat. For Zeus, even the refreshing ocean spray was dangerous to him. We might as well have been floating on a sea of acid. I couldn't help but think how courageous he was.

"What happened to the *Watt*?" I asked.

"Zeus did that," Tessa said. "From the deck of the *Ampere*."

“It was a fluke,” Zeus said. “They were loading torpedoes on top and I couldn’t resist. I didn’t think it would go up like that. Ka-boom.”

“Ka-boom is right,” Taylor said.

“You rock, dude,” Jack said. Jack went to high-five Zeus, but Zeus quickly pulled back.

“Sorry, man,” he said. “Your hands are wet.”

“My bad,” Jack said. He wiped his hands on his shirt, then they high-fived.

* * *

Ten minutes later Jaime careened the boat toward shore, which was now visible in the early light. As we approached the dock, I could see a white van in the distance with two figures leaning against it.

“Who’s that with Dodds?” I asked.

“It’s Abi,” Ian said.

“Abi came back?”

“It was her idea to come back,” Ian said. “But we were all thinking it. None of us could stand the idea of you guys doing this alone. We tried to radio you the same day we landed, but there was a communication problem.”

“That’s because we were compromised,” Ostin said. “We lost radio contact.”

“So you touched the States,” I said.

“For a day,” Ian said.

“More like a few hours,” Tessa said.

“Did you meet the voice?” I asked.

“No. But I saw your mother,” Ian said.

“You did?”

He nodded. “She gave me a hug. She looked good. Probably because she was eating something better than rat biscuits. She asked me to tell you that she loves you and to be careful.” He grinned. “I didn’t tell her that you were planning on blowing up the Elgen’s main boat.”

“Probably for the best,” I said.

“I thought so,” he replied. He turned to Ostin. “I met your parents too.”

Ostin’s eyes opened wide. “You saw my mom and dad?”

“Yes. They were very proud of you. Your mom said something like, ‘I always knew he would make a difference in this world.’”

“Awesome,” Ostin said. He was grinning from ear to ear. “Totally awesome.”

* * *

As we pulled up to the dock, we could clearly see two massive pillars of black smoke rising from the port a mile south of us. Dodds and Abigail walked out to meet us. Abigail was frantically counting heads on the boat.

Jaime said, “Jack, please throw out the rope.”

“Got it,” he said, climbing to the front.

Dodds caught the rope, pulled the boat up to the dock, and tied the rope to a metal cleat. Then he stood and raised his arms out to us. “The warriors return.”

“You’re all here,” Abigail said.

“We thought of dying,” Tessa said. “But no one wanted to miss the after party.”

Jack climbed out first, then helped everyone else out. Taylor and I were the last to disembark.

“Michael Vey,” Dodds said. “Your Electroclan has lived up to its reputation.”

“We survived,” I said.

“That’s good too,” he said. We embraced.

Then Dodds stepped back, leaving Taylor and me standing next to Abigail.

“Welcome back,” she said.

“You too,” I said. “What brought you back?”

“Something you said.”

“What was that?”

“You said not to regret my decision. I couldn’t. If something had happened to you, I would have regretted it the rest of my life.” She

put her arms around me. “You were right to stay. But mostly I’m just glad you’re safe.”

When we parted, Taylor hugged her as well. “You saved our lives.”

Abigail held her tight. “They were worth saving.”

* * *

The ride back to the villa at Miraflores was happily crowded, with Taylor and Abigail sitting across our laps. As we pulled up the villa’s palm-tree-lined drive, I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful everything looked. I remembered wondering as we drove off if I’d ever see it again.

Jaime pulled the van up to the front of the house and everyone piled out.

“I’m getting out of this clown suit,” Jack said, pulling off his sailor shirt. “Dodds, where are my clothes?”

“I put them in the bags your sailor suit came in,” he said.

“I’m keeping mine for a souvenir,” Ostin said.

“I’m burning mine,” Taylor said.

“We burned a few of them on the boat,” Zeus said.

The idea of that didn’t bring me joy. We had sunk a ship. I didn’t want to think about all the people who were on it—even if they were part of Hatch’s navy.

Taylor was holding my hand and she looked over at me with understanding.

* * *

After we were all inside, Jaime shut the door behind us. Jaime said, “In a few minutes Mr. Dodds and I will be going to Lima to see what the Elgen are doing and how the government is responding.”

“We will also be making arrangements for your flight home,” Dodds said.

Home. The word sounded sweet even if I wasn’t sure where “home” was anymore.

“Someday, the world may talk about what happened here today,” Dodds said. “But until then, we are very proud of you. You should all

get some rest. You deserve it.”

“Tonight we will be having a big fiesta to celebrate our heroes,” Jaime said. “While we are in town, we will shop for food. Does anyone want anything special from town?”

“Inca Kola,” I said. “*Muy* cold.”

“*Sí*, Kola,” Jaime repeated.

“And some *granadilla*,” I said.

“*Granadilla*,” Tessa said. “You mean that snot fruit?”

I shrugged. “It kind of grew on me.”

“There’s something I need you to pick up,” Taylor said. She walked up to Jaime and whispered something in his ear. Jaime nodded and smiled. “*Sí*, *senorita*.” He turned to Dodds. “*Vámonos*.”

The two of them walked out the front door. Taylor came back and took my hand.

“What did you ask Jaime for?”

“Just some things.” She looked into my eyes. “May I talk to you? In private?”

The gravity of her voice worried me. “Of course.”

We walked into a room and Taylor shut the door behind us. She looked a little uncomfortable. “I wanted to talk to you about what I said in the engine room—in those last seconds when we thought we were going to die.”

I frowned. “It’s okay,” I said. “I understand. People say crazy things when they’re scared.”

“I meant every word of it.”

We looked at each other, then my mouth rose in a large smile. “Me too,” I said. “Someday I’ll make good on it.”

She smiled that beautiful smile. “I’ll be waiting.”



Taylor and I slept until late afternoon, then woke and talked for about an hour before we heard the van return. We walked out to the front room as Dodds opened the door. He was followed by Jaime, who was holding the hand of a young Peruvian woman.

“Who is she?” Taylor asked Dodds.

“Roxanna is a friend of Jaime’s,” he said. “She’s going to help cook our feast.”

“Did you find anything out about the Elgen?” I asked.

Dodds frowned. “Yes. Much.”

Jaime looked over at us.

“Good news or bad?” I asked.

“Both,” Dodds said. “We’ll talk after dinner.”

“Yes,” Jaime said, walking toward us. “We talk after dinner. But not now. Now we fiesta.”

“Did you remember my things?” Taylor asked.

“Of course, senorita. Your surprise.”

I looked at Taylor. “Your surprise?”

She nodded. “There’s something we need to do.”

* * *

Jaime and Roxanna worked for nearly three hours to put together our feast, filling the villa with the pungent aroma of their cooking and crowding the table with colorful Peruvian delicacies, which Jaime introduced to us.

“Welcome, friends. We have made for you *kalea mixta*, a fried seafood platter with shrimp, squid, mussels, fish, and yucca sticks, *tacu tacu*, steak with bean cake, and *aji de gallina*, chicken in spicy sauce.”

We applauded.

“Epic!” Ostin shouted.

“This is my friend Roxanna,” Jaime said. “She does not speak English, but she helped me create our feast.”

“Roxanna rocks!” Ostin shouted.

We applauded for her, too. She shyly bowed. “Thank you.”

Jaime turned on some festive Peruvian music and we all took plates and started eating. Throughout the party I kept my eye on Jack, who sat alone. Abigail went to sit by him. I couldn’t hear what he said to her, but she looked upset as she turned away, walking across the room to sit next to Zeus and Tessa. It seemed to me that now that the fear and danger were over, his mind had returned to his grief over Wade. Perhaps it was survivor’s guilt.

When Jack finished eating, he got up to leave.

Taylor turned to me. “We better do it now,” she said, standing.

As she walked to the kitchen, I shouted, “Jack!”

He turned back. “Yeah?”

“Where are you going?”

“To bed. I’m done eating.”

“There’s dessert.”

“I don’t do desserts,” he said.

“This one’s especially for you.”

Everyone looked over at us. Jaime switched off the music and McKenna turned out the lights, then disappeared into the kitchen with Taylor.

“What’s going on?” Jack asked.

Taylor walked out of the kitchen holding a birthday cake lit with seventeen candles. She began to sing, alone at first, then joined by the rest of us. "Happy birthday to Wade."

Jack stood there, speechless.

When we'd finished singing, Taylor said, "Would you blow out the candles?"

Jack hesitated for a moment, then he walked up and blew out the candles. Everyone clapped. McKenna turned the lights back on.

I walked to Taylor's side in front of the room. "In light of this being a special day," I said, "I have a special announcement to make."

Taylor handed me a rolled piece of parchment tied with a silver ribbon. I slid the document out and unrolled it.

In my most dignified voice I said, "With the power vested in me as president of the Electroclan, I hereby award our highest honor, the Electroclan Medal of Valor, to Wade West, for his courage, loyalty, and dedication in the line of duty. Jack, as his mentor, best friend, and brother, we think it is appropriate that you accept this honor for him."

Jack took the paper from me. He looked down at the award for a moment, then said, "Can I say something?"

"Of course," I said. I stepped back.

"I don't know how well you really knew Wade. Wade was the kind of guy who some people thought was hard to get to know. He didn't trust many people. It wasn't his fault. The people who should have taken care of him let him down." Suddenly, Jack choked up. "But I loved him. I didn't always treat him the best. But I always loved him." Jack wiped his eyes. "What hurts the most, is that I wish I had told him that. I just wish I had treated him better. That's all."

The room was silent. Then Taylor stepped forward. In her hand she held another piece of paper. "I would also like to say something. I'd like to read something." She held up the piece of paper. "This is dated January twenty-first, 2011." She cleared her throat.

Today my grandmother hit me again. She bashed me like a hundred times with a wooden spoon, and then with a tennis racquet. I have cuts and bruises all over. It takes all I have not to just haul off and knock her

one, but I know they'll throw me in jail if I do. The last time I stood up to her she called the police, and when they came she acted like a sweet old lady who got stuck with a low-life juvie. Of course the police took her side. Once you have a record, cops don't bother to think. Every time I tried to say something they just told me to shut up. One of them threatened to tase me. Sometimes I feel like this crummy world is completely stacked against me and I want to give up.

Then I think about my best friend, Jack. Jack's been dealt a bad hand too. His old man's an alcoholic. His mom left him, and one of his brothers is a drug head and in prison, but Jack never gives up and he never complains. He conquers. He's a warrior. He's the kind of warrior I want to be someday. If it wasn't for him I probably would have just ended it a long time ago. I know Jack will never read this, but if he did, I'd say "I love you, man."

Taylor looked up from the letter.

Jack was crying. When he could speak he said, "Where did you get that?"

"Jaime," she said. "The voice did background checks on all of us. You didn't know it, but Wade kept a secret blog. I guess he thought you wouldn't think he was a very good warrior if he shared his feelings."

Abigail walked over to Jack and this time he didn't reject her. This time the dam broke. He fell onto his knees, sobbing. "My heart is broken," he said. "It's just broken."

Abigail wrapped her arms around him and held him to her. "I know, honey," she said. "But you're going to be okay. We're going to help you get through this. All of us are."

She pulled him in tighter. Jack just wept.



It was at least fifteen minutes before Dodds spoke. The emotion in the room was still very strong. Jack was quiet, lying in Abigail's arms.

"This was a very special evening," he said. "I share my deep condolences for all of you. Especially you, Jack. I wish I could delay what I have to say, but it's late and time doesn't afford me that luxury.

"As you know, Jaime and I went into Lima today. We went as close to the dock as we dared. But we learned what we expected. The government is blaming the attacks on the American terrorists. They have matched the Elgen's bounty of two and a half million soles on each of your heads." He looked at Jack and Ostin. "That includes you two as well.

"In a country where more than a third of the people make less than a dollar a day, a million dollars makes you quite a target. We need to get you out of here as soon as possible. Our jet will be here in the morning." He glanced at Jaime, then breathed out slowly, as if in exasperation. "We have some unfortunate news. Hatch is still alive."

We all gasped.

"What?" I said.

“His security detail rushed him off the boat as soon as the *Watt* blew up.”

We were all quiet, stunned, then Zeus said, “You mean I saved his life?”

“Indirectly,” Dodds said.

“I screwed up big,” he said.

“No you didn’t,” I said. “If you hadn’t blown up the *Watt*, none of us would be here.”

Dodds continued, “We’ve slowed Hatch down. We’ve given Tuvalu a chance to respond to their threat, if they’re smart enough to make use of it. You’ve freed Chairman Schema and the Elgen board. I admit, that’s a wild card. We don’t know where that will lead. But Schema isn’t stupid. He’s going to fight Hatch to gain back control of the corporation. That might sound like the lesser of two evils, but so be it. Schema’s about profits, not conquest. We can live with that.

“Michael, tonight, you and Taylor gave us all a nice surprise. We have a surprise for you as well.”

Jaime left the room, then returned carrying the radio. He set it down on the kitchen table and motioned me over.

“We cannot stay in contact for very long,” Dodds said. “But there’s someone who would like to speak with you.”

Jaime turned up the radio’s volume. There was a blast of static, then a voice said, “Michael. Are you there?”

“Mom!”

“How are you, son?”

“I’m good. I’m really good.”

“I have missed you so much. They say you’re coming back now. I can’t wait to see you.”

“Me too.”

“I have so much to tell you. Things I can’t tell you over the radio.” She paused. “Oh, Michael. I’m so proud of you. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

“They’re telling me I need to go, but is Ostin there?”

“He’s right here,” I said.

“I’m here, Mrs. Vey,” Ostin said.

“There’s someone here who would like to say hello.”

Another woman's voice came on. "Hello? How does this work? Can he hear me?"

"Just talk, Ruth."

"Are you sure? Ostin? Are you there?"

"Mom! Dad!" Ostin shouted.

"You're there," Mrs. Liss said.

"How are you, son?" Mr. Liss asked.

"I'm good. We're all good."

"We're so relieved," Mrs. Liss said. "You know how I worry."

"I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to worry you."

"They're saying we need to go," Mr. Liss said. "We're proud of you, son. And we'll see you soon."

"We don't know where in the world you are," Mrs. Liss said. "But you be careful. And don't forget to brush. Gingivitis is the silent killer."

"*Gingivitis?*" McKenna mouthed.

Ostin blushed. "Okay. I'll see you soon."

For a moment the radio went dead. Then another voice came on. *The voice.*

"Congratulations, Electroclan. Well done. You never cease to amaze. We are all looking forward to seeing you again." He paused. "I would like to share with you some developments in our cause."

"There is a nine-year-old girl from the province of Guangdong, China. Her name is Lin YuLong. In English that means *jade dragon*. She is a child prodigy. Her IQ is 182, higher than Einstein's."

"That's higher than mine," Ostin mumbled.

"Two weeks ago she started posting a thesis on her blog about an experiment she was working on. In English, her thesis was called 'The Theoretical Transference and Electrification of the Human Nervous System.'"

"Whatever that means," Taylor said.

"What it means," the voice said, "is that she figured out how the MEI works and why it made you electric but not the other children."

"That's what Hatch has been looking for," Ostin said.

"Exactly," the voice said. "And apparently he's found it. By the time we discovered the blog, the posting was nine days old. YuLong was

kidnapped three days ago.”

“I see where this is going,” Ostin said.

“I’m sure you do,” the voice said. “This has always been Hatch’s master plan. If he can produce hundreds of thousands of electric children, all under his control, it’s over.”

“So now what?” I asked.

“We believe that the Elgen are holding YuLong in their Taiwan Starxource plant, waiting for their science ship, the *Volta*, to arrive in the South Pacific, where they can put her to work. We can’t let that happen.”

“You want us to go to Taiwan and rescue her?” I said.

“After all you’ve just come through, I know that’s asking a lot. But you’re our best hope.”

I looked around the room. No one spoke for a moment, then Jack said, “I’m in.”

“I’m not leaving you again,” Abigail said. “I’m going.”

“YOLO,” Zeus said. “In.”

“I’m there,” Ian said.

“All right,” Tessa said. “You guys are crazy, but I’m in.”

“Of course,” McKenna said. “You need me. I’m Chinese. I’ve got the perfect cover.”

“Ostin?” I said.

“No-brainer,” he replied. “You know how I love Chinese food.”

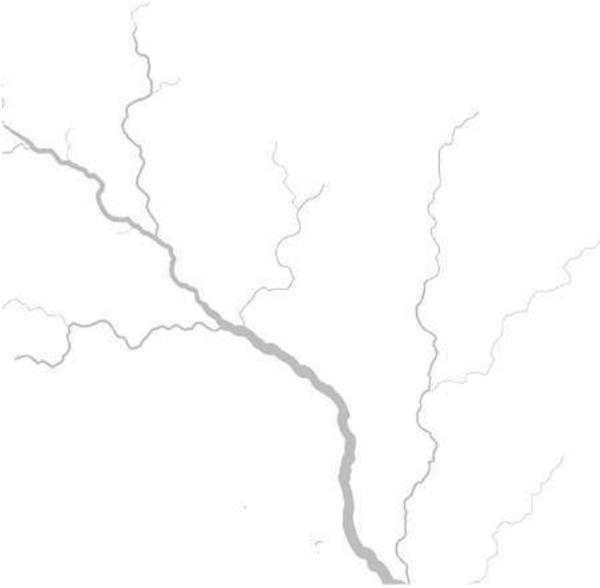
I looked at Taylor. She just looked at me for a moment, then shook her head and groaned. “I’m in. It’s been at least an hour since my life was in mortal danger. I was already getting bored.”

I kissed her on the cheek. “All right,” I said. “Looks like we’re in. Let’s find Jade Dragon.”



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SIMON PULSE / MERCURY INK

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

www.SimonandSchuster.com

First Simon Pulse/Mercury Ink hardcover edition September 2013

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Interior designed by Mike Rosamilia

The text of this book was set in Berling LT std.

This book has been cataloged with the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4424-7511-3

ISBN 978-1-4424-7513-7 (eBook)

Author photo by Debra MacFarlane

Jacket design by Jessica Handelman

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MICHAEL VEY

HUNT FOR JADE DRAGON

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Michael Vey sweeps the world."

—JAMES DASHNER,

New York Times bestselling author
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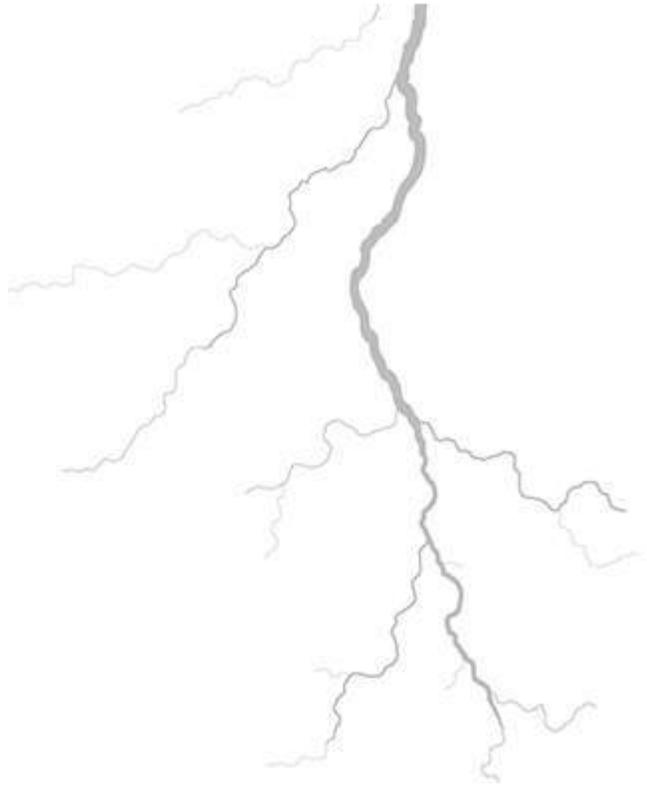
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To my Allyson, You are a joy and a blessing in my life.



PROLOGUE



The ES *Faraday*
Port of Callao Harbor, Peru

“This is a cattle ship,” Hatch shouted, throwing his half-full glass of Scotch against the wall. “Do you hear me? I’m living on a stinking cattle ship!”

“Yes, sir,” his servant said, scrambling to clean up the mess. Even though she was accustomed to Hatch’s volcanic temper, his outbursts still frightened her.

After the Electroclan sank the *Ampere*—the Elgen’s luxury superyacht—Hatch and the remaining Elgen onboard had taken up residence on the *Faraday*, the Elgen troop ship and the largest boat of the Elgen fleet. “Vey and his terrorist friends will pay for this,” Hatch grumbled. He reached for his glass before remembering he’d just thrown it. “Hurry and clean up that mess,” he said to his servant, who was still on her knees collecting shards of glass in the palm of her hand. “Then get me another drink.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied.

Someone rapped lightly on the door.

“Who is it?” Hatch said.

“It’s Captain Welch, sir. I have a report.” Captain Welch was the head of the Elite Global Guard and one of the few Elgen allowed to speak directly to the admiral.

“What are you waiting for, EGG?” Hatch said.

Welch saluted as he entered the room, forcing himself not to look at the woman kneeling on the ground. “Excuse the interruption, Admiral. But we’ve captured the Chinese girl. Jade Dragon.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s in the custody of the Lung Li. They’ve smuggled her out of China. They’re now in Taipei on their way to the Starxource plant.”

“Have they gotten her to talk?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not?”

“There’s a problem.”

Hatch’s eyes flashed. “I don’t want *problems*, EGG. I want *results*. Make her talk. Threaten her. Threaten her family. Threaten her dog if you have to.”

“Sir, I’m afraid it will take more than threats.”

“Then torture her!”

“We don’t think she’ll understand torture.”

Hatch pounded his fist on his desk. “What is there to understand about torture? Quit talking in circles, Welch.”

“The girl is deaf and mute. And she’s autistic. It’s unlikely that she’ll make the correlation between the pain we inflict and the information we’re trying to get from her. Torture may have a deterring effect.”

The servant set another glass of scotch in front of Hatch, which calmed him. He took a drink, then said, “This *genius* we’ve captured is a deaf, mute, autistic child?”

“Yes, sir. She’s an autistic savant.”

He nodded slowly. “A *savant*. How did we not know this?”

“We knew little about her except the brilliance of her work, sir.”

Hatch pondered the predicament, then said, “Get her to our scientists on the *Volta*. They’ll know what to do with her.”

“Shall we fly her there?”

“No, the *Volta* is already at sea. Have them change course to Taiwan. And find an expert on autism. I want someone who knows how to make the girl talk, so to speak.”

“Shall we leave her in the custody of the Lung Li?”

He shook his head. “Not just the Lung Li. I want my Eagles to personally guard her.”

“Your Eagles?”

“My Glows,” he said. “Quentin will be in charge.”

“Where are the youths, sir?”

“They’re in Beverly Hills. I want them in Taiwan by the day after tomorrow, except for Torstyn and Tara. I’m going to need their services in Switzerland.”

“Yes, sir. Anything else, sir?”

“While you’re waiting for the *Volta* to arrive, I want you to spread the word around the plant that we have the girl.”

“That seems unwise, sir. Word may leak to the resistance.”

“I’m counting on it,” Hatch said.

“I don’t understand.”

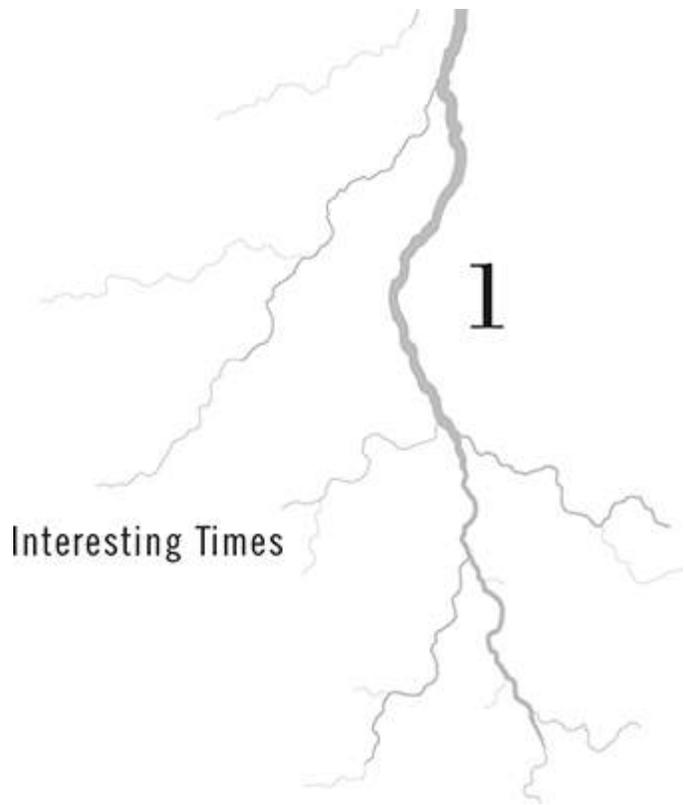
“If they know we have the girl, they’ll send that snake, Michael Vey, to rescue her.”

Welch’s forehead furrowed. “You want Vey in Taiwan?”

“More than you can imagine.” Hatch leaned forward over his glass. “You know how to kill a snake, don’t you? Decapitation. You cut off its head and the body dies. We’ve underestimated Vey. He’s been at the head of every Elgen conflict. Without Vey, there is no resistance.” Hatch drained the glass, then his voice fell to a low, guttural tone, almost as if he were talking to himself. “I’ve had enough of this boy and his Electroclan. It’s time we cut off some heads.”



PART ONE



My best friend, Ostin Liss, told me that there is an ancient Chinese curse that says:

MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES

My name is Michael Vey, and I'm definitely living in interesting times. Just a year ago that wasn't true. In fact, my life was about as exciting as one of Ostin's clogging recitals. I was just an average, no-name freshman at Meridian High School in Meridian, Idaho—a small town where the only thing above average is the cow-to-human ratio. Don't feel bad if you've never heard of Meridian, Idaho. Neither has anyone else.

I lived with my mother, who worked as a checker at the grocery store, in a tiny apartment with eggshell-white walls and green shag carpet. I walked to school every day; avoided bullies, the principal, most types of math, and organized sports; and played video games with my best (and only) friend, Ostin, six out of seven days of the week. And I watched Shark Week twice a year. That pretty much summed up my life.

I suppose the only thing vaguely interesting about me was my Tourette's syndrome, which isn't really that interesting because I don't do any of the fascinating things that some people with Tourette's do, like shout out swear words in public or make animal noises. I mostly just blink or gulp a lot. I know, boring.

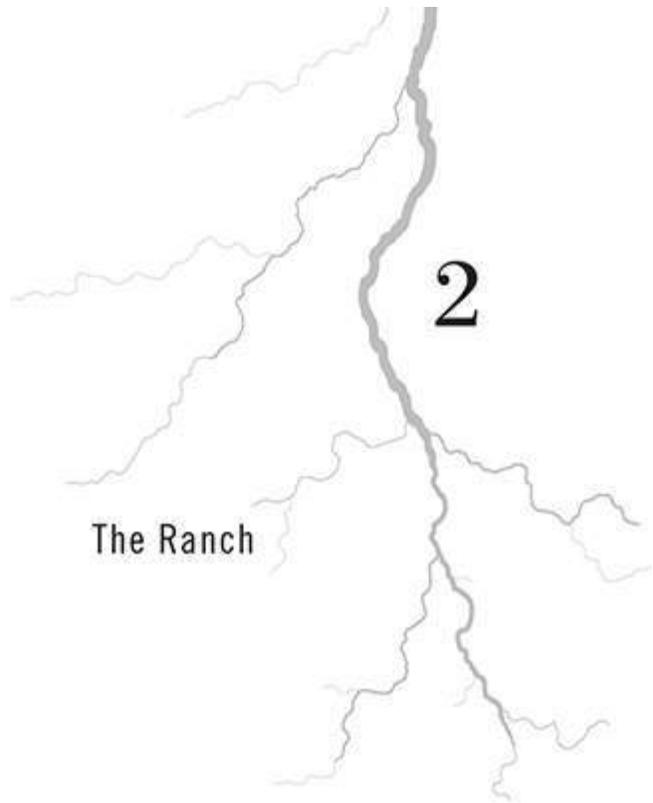
Actually, what I just said about Tourette's being the only interesting thing about me isn't really true. There's something about me that has always been very interesting—I'm just not allowed to tell anyone. I'm electric.

Which is what's led to my new and very interesting life. For those keeping score, in the last year I've done the following:

- Made friends with a group of kids with electric powers like mine.
- Been locked up in a cell and tortured.
- Shut down a private school.
- Scored a really hot girlfriend. (Still can't believe that one.)
- Flown to Peru and rescued my mother.
- Been tied up and almost fed to rats.
- Blown up a major power plant.
- Made Peru's list of most wanted criminals.
- Been chased through the jungle by helicopters with flamethrowers.
- Lived with the Amacarra tribe in the Amazon jungle.
- Attacked the Peruvian army and rescued my friends before they could be executed for terrorism.
- Blew up the *Ampere*, a billion-dollar superyacht, before the Elgen could take over and enslave the entire island nation of Tuvalu (which, like Meridian, Idaho, you've also never heard of).

Now we're preparing to fly to Taiwan to rescue a nine-year-old Chinese girl from the Taiwanese army and a group of Elgen superninjas called the Lung Li.

I have a feeling things are about to get a whole lot more interesting.



“Michael, wake up. You’re dreaming.” I opened my eyes to see my girlfriend, Taylor, leaning over me. “It’s okay, you’re just dreaming.”

I rubbed my eyes, then slowly sat up. “Where are we?”

“Still in the van.”

I took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. The right side of my mouth was ticking like crazy. “I had another nightmare.”

“I know. I saw it.”

“You saw my nightmare?”

Taylor nodded. “It was terrifying. This time I was in it.”

Ever since we blew up the *Ampere* I’d been having recurring nightmares of the explosion and the boat sinking. I could see people trapped inside the boat, screaming as they tried to get out before they drowned. But lately they had been people I knew, like my mother or Ostin. This time it was Taylor.

“It was awful,” I said.

Taylor wrapped her arms around me. “I wish I knew how to take them away. I tried.”

“Maybe that’s why you were in it,” I said.

We had left Peru before sunrise and flown for about six hours, finally landing on a dirt runway in the middle of nowhere. As we got off the plane we were met by two men wearing suits and dark sunglasses who said little other than to tell us to board their van. Now we had been traveling on the same dirt road for more than an hour, an unending landscape of meadow grass, cacti, and cypress and Joshua trees occasionally broken up by barbwire fences. I squinted against the late-afternoon sun as I looked out the window. “Any idea where we are?”

“No. Just more of the same,” Taylor said. “I feel like we’re in one of those cartoons where the same background keeps going by.”

“Look, cows,” Abigail said, pointing ahead of us. “Hundreds of them.”

Everyone looked out to see a large herd scattered across the landscape.

“Actually they’re Brangus cattle,” Ostin said. “They’re a cross between the Indian Brahman and the Scottish Angus breeds originating from hybrid research conducted in Jeanerette, Louisiana, in 1932.”

“What did he say they were?” Jack asked.

“Cows,” Abigail said.

“When are we going to get there?” McKenna asked.

“Where is *there*?” Tessa said. “Why do they have to be so secretive about everything? It’s not like we’re Elgen.”

“Please don’t say that,” the man in the front passenger seat of the van said. It was the first time he’d spoken since we’d started driving.

“Say what ... *Elgen*?” Tessa said, deliberately using the word.

“You never know who is listening,” the man said.

Tessa groaned. “If someone was listening to us they would have already died of boredom.”

“It’s better we don’t know where we are,” I said, “in case we’re captured and they torture us for information.”

“You’ve got a way with words, Vey,” Tessa said. “I feel so much better now.” She asked the driver, “Are we there yet?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the driver said without turning back. “This is the Timepiece Ranch.”

“We’re going to a ranch?” Taylor asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” the driver said.

“A ranch makes sense,” I said. “They’d have privacy. Room to do things. You could detonate a bomb out here and no one would know.”

“Right,” Tessa said. “They can’t hear a bomb, but they can hear me whisper ‘Elgen’?”

“She’s got a point,” Ostin said.

“Maybe they’ll have horses we can ride,” Taylor said to me. “Do you like horses?”

“I’ve never ridden one,” I said.

She smiled. “It’s fun. I’ll teach you.”

“Why are we going to a ranch?” Tessa asked. “Why aren’t we flying to China to rescue the girl?”

“We’re not going to China,” Ostin said. “We’re going to Taiwan.”

“Same thing,” Tessa said.

“Yeah, right,” Ostin said, shaking his head. “That’s like saying Cuba and the United States are the same country. Taiwan is a multiparty democratic state. China is a communist state. The Chinese government claims Taiwan as its twenty-third province, while the Taiwanese constitutionally claim sovereignty over all of China.”

“Thanks for the geography lesson,” Tessa said.

“Did you know the entire country of Taiwan could fit in the land mass of Massachusetts, yet, at one time, had more than twenty-five different languages?”

“How do you know so much?” McKenna asked.

“I’m a fact sponge,” Ostin said.

Tessa slid down in her seat. “Someone just kill me.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes later Tessa said to the driver, “I thought you said we were already there.”

“We are,” the driver said. “It’s a fifty-thousand-acre ranch.”

“Holy cow,” Ostin said.

“He means holy *Brangus*,” Abigail said.

Jack laughed. It was good to hear him laugh. Ever since Wade’s death he rarely laughed anymore.

Five minutes later the van slowed to a halt at a steel-and-barbwire gate next to a wooden shed. There was a tall, muscular man standing in front of the gate. He wore a cowboy hat, boots, and a leather vest.

“A cowboy,” Abigail said. “I love cowboys. They’re hot.” She turned to Jack. “You should get one of those hats. You’d look cute in it.”

“I’m not going for *cute*,” Jack said.

“Michael,” Ian said, leaning over the back of my seat. “See that guy? The guard.”

“Yeah.”

“He looks like a cowboy, but he’s all teched-up with a radio and remotes and he’s wearing a bulletproof vest. That wooden shed behind him is actually a steel-reinforced concrete bunker with a fifty-millimeter machine gun and an antitank gun. And there are landmines all along the road and fence line. I’m guessing they’re remote controlled. He’s got everyone fooled.”

“Except you,” Taylor said.

Ian smiled. “Except me.”

“I’m glad you’re on our side,” I said.

Our driver got out of the van. He spoke to the guard for a moment, and then he got back in and the gate opened. The dirt road we had been riding on changed to asphalt as we drove forward about another hundred yards past a large communications tower where the road split. We took the right fork and our path wound down into a long, narrow valley before ending at a large compound.

There were three large buildings built around a central structure, which was several stories high. The roofs of the structures were covered with solar panels and wind turbines. There were similar turbines on the ridge of the opposite hill.

Behind the main building were several aluminum-sided garages, a helipad with a helicopter, and three corrugated-steel grain silos, all of which were taller than the one I had practiced climbing on in Peru. There was also a long rectangular structure that looked like one of the commercial chicken coops near Meridian.

“What’s in the chicken-coop-looking building?” I asked. “Weapons?”

“Chickens,” Ian said.

“It’s really a chicken coop?”

“They’ve got to eat, right? And there’s really wheat in those silos.”

“What’s in the garages?” Taylor asked. “Potatoes?”

“No, *those* are weapons. There’s a tank in one, and an attack helicopter in the other.”

“Looks like they’re preparing for war,” I said.

“Looks like they’re *prepared* for war,” Ian said. “There’s a huge underground bunker behind the main house, and the buildings don’t look like anything I’ve seen before. The outer walls are all lined with some kind of metal mesh. It looks like chicken wire.”

“Maybe they used to be chicken coops too,” Taylor said.

“Faraday cages,” Ostin said.

“What?” I said.

“Faraday cages,” Ostin repeated. “They block external static and electric fields by evenly channeling electricity through the cage and diffusing—”

“Explain in English,” Taylor said.

“Sorry,” Ostin said. “The metal mesh protects the building’s wiring from electromagnetic pulses.”

“Why would there be an electromagnetic pulse out here?” Taylor asked.

“It’s what the Elgen are working on,” I said. “EMP weaponry. Once they perfect it they’ll be able to shut down the power of entire cities.”

“Not here,” Ostin said. “If there’s a major EMP blast, this place will still function. Of course, they must have their own fuel tanks and electric generators.”

“The fuel tanks are underground next to the silos,” Ian said. “The third garage has two large generators.” He turned to Ostin. “How did you know that?”

“It wouldn’t do any good to wrap the house in mesh to protect the home’s wiring if the source of their electricity is destroyed. Common sense.”

“We should all be so common,” Ian mumbled.

The man in the passenger seat lifted a handset and said, “Egret four descending.”

“Egret four clear,” a voice returned.

After another quarter mile, the slope leveled off and the van pulled up to the front of the central structure, a tall ranch-style building with a long, wood-planked porch. The driveway was lined with rusted, antique farm equipment and pale yellow and purple wildflowers. There were a couple dozen chickens pecking around the yard.

“This is the real deal,” McKenna said. “Wish I had some cowboy boots.”

“Pink ones,” Abigail said.

After we had come to a stop our driver said, “Please, stay in your seats for just a moment.”

The building's front door opened and a tall, muscularly built, sandy-haired man walked out, flanked by two other men and a woman. Something about the tall man and the woman seemed familiar.

"Who's that dude?" Zeus asked.

"Maybe he's the voice," Taylor answered.

"Maybe," I said.

The man in the passenger seat got out and opened the van's sliding door. "Everyone out, please."

"Let's go," I said.

As soon as we were all out of the van the man slid the door shut again and the driver pulled away without him.

The sandy-haired man looked us over. "Welcome to Timepiece Ranch. We're happy to see you in one piece."

"You mean alive?" Zeus said.

The man's mouth rose in a half smile. "Yes. We're especially glad to see you alive."

"Not all of us," Jack said.

The man's smile fell. For a moment he just looked at Jack; then he started walking toward him. I noticed the muscles in Jack's neck tense.

"You must be Jack," the man said.

Jack stared defiantly into his eyes. "You got it, Tex."

The man put his hand on Jack's shoulder. "I'm sorry for your loss. You've sacrificed more than anyone here. I promise you, I will do everything in my power to see that Wade's life was not lost in vain. Wade is a hero. And so are you. We are all in your debt."

Jack's muscles relaxed and he blinked with sudden emotion. "Thank you, sir."

"No, thank *you*. We're not just in your debt; the whole world is in your debt. Whether they know it or not." He turned to the rest of us. "If it wasn't for you, the people of Tuvalu would be living a nightmare right now. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of innocent people would have died. I'm sure you're all very tired and hungry, and there are some people here who are very excited to see you. So let's get you checked into your rooms."

"I have a question," I said.

"Michael," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Are you the voice?"

"No."

“Will we meet the voice?”

He hesitated, then said, “Maybe. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Who are you?” Jack asked.

“My name is Joel,” he said. “I forgot to tell you, before you enter the compound there is one inconvenience. My men need to check you for RFIDs. Then we’ll show you to your quarters. You have a few hours before the reception.”

“Reception?” Taylor said.

“We’ve put together a reception in your honor. You’ll have time to rest a little, then shower and change before then.”

“Change into what?” Tessa said. “We don’t have any other clothes.”

“Sydney Lynn will take care of that,” he said. He turned and walked back toward the building.

The woman who had walked out with Joel stepped forward carrying a clipboard at her side. “I’m Sydney Lynn. After you are checked and cleared, I’ll take you to your rooms, where you can rest, then clean up and change. I’ll come get you when it’s time for the reception. In the meantime, if you need anything, please let me know. I’m here to take care of you.”

“Like I just said,” Tessa said, “change into what? We don’t have any clothes.”

“We have clothes for you,” Sydney Lynn replied. “They should fit.” She looked at Ostin and me. “Michael, you’ve grown taller.”

“I think so,” I said, wondering how she knew.

“That which doesn’t kill you only makes you taller,” Tessa said.

“And Ostin, yours might be a bit loose. It looks like you’ve lost weight.” Ostin smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s the Peruvian prisoner diet,” Taylor whispered to me.

I suddenly realized why Sydney Lynn looked familiar. She was the woman who had handed me the cell phone at Jack’s sister’s tanning salon. “You helped us in Meridian.”

She smiled. “Bronze Idaho,” she replied. “It’s good to see you again, Michael.”

Just then a shrill Southern voice pierced the air. “Ostin!”

We looked over to see Ostin’s mother running toward us from the side doorway, her arms flailing like she was going to sack a quarterback. A much more subdued Mr. Liss was a few yards behind her.

“Mom!” Ostin shouted.

As we watched their reunion I heard someone say, “Michael.” I turned back. My mother was walking toward me from the front door.

“Mom!”

Her eyes were full of tears. We didn’t say much, just hugged. When she could speak she asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said.

She looked at me as if she couldn’t believe we were really together, then she brushed the hair back from my forehead. “I heard about Wade. I’m so sorry.”

“It was awful,” I said. “Still is awful.”

She hugged me tightly again. As we parted Taylor said, “Hi, Mrs. Vey.”

“Taylor,” my mother said. She hugged her.

Everyone gathered around my mother like she was a magnet, which, in a way, was true. Everyone except for Jack, who stood a few yards off, quietly watching.

My mother walked over to him. Without speaking, she hugged him, then gazed into his face. “I’m so sorry about Wade. I know what it’s like to lose someone you love. If I can do anything for you, or you just need to talk, I’m here.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Vey,” Jack said.

“Call me Sharon,” she said.

It was a little strange seeing my mother so familiar with everyone. The last time I’d seen her was just before everyone fled through the pipe at the Peruvian Starxource plant and I’d been captured. Since that time my mother had been through a lot with the rest of the Electroclan.

“Zeus, who is your friend?” my mother said, looking at Tessa.

Tessa stepped forward. “I’m Tessa.”

“Tessa,” she repeated. “Is that short for Contessa?”

Tessa shrugged. “I was pretty young when the Elgen took me. I don’t know where my name came from.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Tessa. I’m Sharon. I’m Michael’s mother.”

“I met Tessa in the jungle,” I said. “She was living with the Amacarra tribe when they saved me.”

“It sounds like we have a lot to catch up on,” my mother said, smiling at me. “I know you must be exhausted. They want us to let you get checked in, then get some rest before tonight’s reception, which I’m in charge of, so

I'd better get back to work. I'll see you in a few hours." She looked back into my eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too, Mom."

Just then Ostin walked up, flanked by his parents. "Hi, Mrs. V."

"Hello, Ostin," my mother said. "It's good to see you back with your parents. They've been a little worried."

"A *little*?" Mrs. Liss said.

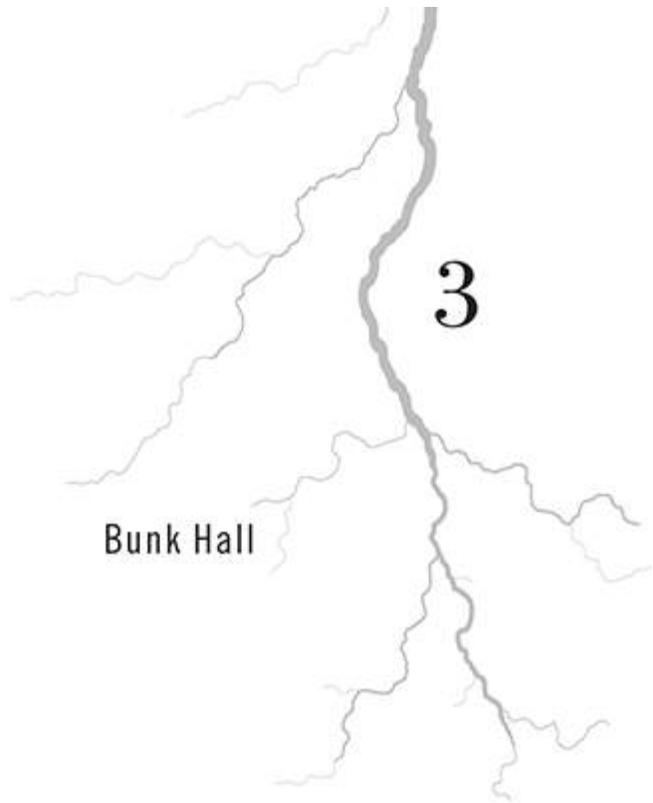
"I know," Ostin said. "But all's well that ends well."

"Yes, it is." My mother turned back to me. "We'll have fun at the reception tonight. Get some rest." We hugged again, then she hurried back to the ranch house.

Ostin watched her go. "She's so hot."

"Ostin!" his mother said.

I shook my head. "Dude, she's my mom."



After separating Ostin from his mother, the men checked us for RFIDs, then Sydney Lynn led us inside the main building, which she called the Ranch House. We entered through the front doors—which had handles made from horseshoes—into a large open room with hallways in three directions.

Like the deceptively simple wooden shack we had passed near the ranch’s gate entrance, the outside of the Ranch House looked rustic, but the inside was filled with high-tech surveillance and communication equipment. In a way it reminded me of the Elgen Academy—but with cowboy art.

The main room interior was Western design. It had polished hardwood floors and a high, vaulted ceiling with exposed wooden beams. On one end of the room there was a massive stone fireplace that rose nearly two stories to the ceiling, tapering off near the top like a keystone.

Sydney Lynn led us to the right. “This way to the bunk hall, please.” We followed her through a doorway and down a long, wood-paneled corridor. All of the doors were numbered.

“I’m sorry there aren’t enough rooms for each of you to have your own, but I think you’ll still find your accommodations comfortable. There are two beds in each room, so pick a roommate. Ladies, let’s get you settled first. Who would like room one?”

“McKenna and I can take it,” Abigail said.

“Very good,” Sydney Lynn said, writing on her clipboard. “I’ll have your clothes sent right over. Next?”

“Looks like it’s me and Tessa,” Taylor said.

Tessa put her hands on her hips. “Poor you,” she said. “Having to share a room with me.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Taylor said.

“It sounded like it.”

“Sorry. That’s not what I meant.”

“Taylor and Tessa, room two,” Sydney Lynn said, ignoring the drama. “And room three is occupied.”

“Who’s in room three?” I asked.

“Grace,” she said.

Tessa’s expression changed. “Grace is here? Grace and I used to be buddies.”

“Maybe you could bunk with her,” Ostin said.

Both Taylor and Tessa glared at him.

Ostin wilted. “Just sayin’.”

“Michael,” Sydney Lynn said, “who are you bunking with?”

“Ostin.”

“Let’s put you in room four.” She turned to Zeus. “Zeus, room five is reserved especially for you and whomever you’re bunking with.”

“What’s so special about room five?” Zeus asked.

“You can shower,” she said. “The water is distilled.”

Zeus stared at her in wonder. “Are you kidding?”

Sydney Lynn smiled. “Why would I be kidding?”

“I’ll bunk with you,” Jack said, then added wryly, “Now that you won’t stink.”

“Yeah, thanks, man,” Zeus said.

Nothing against Zeus, but it made me a little sad that Jack was paired up with him. Up to that point it had always been a given that Jack would be bunking with Wade.

“Ian, that leaves you with your own room.”

“Make that my own *suite*,” Ian said with a smile. “Comfort over company. I’ll take the privacy.”

“And I’ll take a nap,” Abigail said. “See you, boys.” She blew Jack a kiss.

I walked up to Taylor. “What are you going to do?”

“I think I’ll take a bath,” she said. “Want to go for a walk later?”

“Sure.”

“Great, see you in an hour.” She kissed me on the cheek, then followed Tessa into their room.

I headed toward my own room. I wondered how long we would be here.



The room Ostin and I were sharing was at least twice the size of my room at home. There was Western art on the walls, mostly paintings of coyotes and buffalo, and a framed woven Native American blanket.

Ostin had already claimed one of the beds and was lying on his back eating something, evidenced by an empty cellophane candy wrapper on the bed next to him. “Look, man. Licorice.” He threw me a package of red licorice, which landed on the floor about ten feet from me.

I picked it up. “Thanks.”

“There’s a bunch of snacks in that cupboard.”

I was amazed at how quickly he’d rooted it out, like a pig hunting for truffles. I took off my shoes, then sat down on the bed. “So what do you think of these guys?”

He stopped chewing. “Why? Don’t you trust them?”

“I didn’t say that. Do you trust them?”

“I think we need to be careful.”

After what we’d been through in the last month, the word sounded ridiculous. “*Careful*,” I said. “You mean like wearing a helmet at chess

tournaments or knee pads to clogging practice?”

“Shut up,” he said.

* * *

Within five minutes Ostin was snoring. I couldn't sleep, in part because of the noise, but also because I was afraid to. Almost every time I closed my eyes the nightmares returned. After enduring a half hour of Ostin's snoring, I put my shoes back on and left the room.

I was a little curious to see what the other rooms in the place looked like, so I opened the first door past Ian's. A tall, redheaded boy lying on his side looked up from a book. “Didn't anyone teach you to knock?” he said.

“Apparently not,” I replied.

He grinned. “Hi, Mike.”

“Hey, Tanner.”

“You made it back in one piece.”

“Barely.”

“I heard you blew up the *Ampere*.”

“Yeah.”

I thought that maybe he saw the flash of pain in my eyes, because he looked at me for a moment as if he wanted to say something more about it. Or maybe I just hoped he would. If anyone would understand how I felt it would be Tanner. From what I'd heard, he also had nightmares about the planes he'd brought down. Instead he just said, “Too bad Hatch wasn't on it.”

“He was. He just got off.” I looked around his room. It looked more lived-in than ours. It was customized. There were stacks of books, framed photographs of Tanner's family, and posters on the walls, mostly of cars. Cool cars. Lamborghinis, Ferraris, and one I'd never seen before. I walked over to it.

“What's this?”

“It's a Bugatti Veyron,” he said. “Vey, like your name. If your name was Ron, that would be my nickname for you.”

“Is it fast?”

He laughed. “Are you electric? It can go two hundred and fifty-four miles per hour. At top speed it burns out its tires in fifteen minutes. And it only costs one point four million dollars.”

I turned back. “Are you kidding?”

“Nope.”

“I couldn’t afford the tires,” I said.

“I’m sure Hatch would buy you one ...” I looked at him, surprised that he would say something like that. “... in exchange for your soul.”

“There’s a trade,” I said. “Cool room.”

“It’s good here. The people are good. Intense, but good.”

“What are you reading?” I asked.

He held up his book. “*Lord of the Flies*.”

The book had been required reading in my last English class. “That’s pretty dark,” I said.

“The world’s dark. Or didn’t you notice?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I noticed.” I took a step back toward him. “You look different.”

“You mean since you last saw me and I was strapped down, psychotic, and drugged?”

I cocked my head. “Yeah.”

“The medication helps.” He gestured to a row of plastic pill bottles on his dresser. “So does the V.”

“What’s the V?”

“That’s what they call themselves around here. Sometimes they call themselves ‘the resistance,’ but usually just the V. Like victory. Or Vey.” He sat up a little. “By the way, your mom rocks. She got me through the jungle. I owe her.”

“I owe *you*,” I said. “Thanks for dropping those flamethrower helicopters. I thought I was toast.”

“Burnt toast,” he said. “I already owed you for breaking me out of that place. Hatch was ready to feed me to his rats.”

“We’ll call it even,” I said.

“You guys going back out?” Tanner asked.

“We’re planning on it. The Elgen kidnapped some little Chinese girl.”

“That’s what I heard. So you’re off to China or Taiwan—someplace with chopsticks.”

“Taiwan. Are you coming with us?”

“No. I’m still in recovery mode.”

“We’ll miss you.” I turned back toward the door. “I’ll let you get back to your book. See you around.”

“I’ll see you at the reception tonight,” he said.

As I grabbed the doorknob he said, "Mike."

"Yeah?"

"It's good to see you again."

"You too," I said.

I walked back out into the hall, shutting the door behind me. Tanner looked completely different from the last time I'd seen him, but, like he'd said, considering the circumstances, I shouldn't have been surprised.

I walked down the hall to Taylor's room and knocked. She opened the door. Tessa was standing behind her looking over some clothes laid out on her bed.

"They brought your clothes?" I asked.

"Just a few minutes ago."

"How are they?"

"Pretty cute, actually."

"Do you still want to go for a walk?"

"Yes," she said, stepping out into the hallway.

We walked back to the Ranch House's main room, then out the same set of doors where we'd entered. Except for the chickens, the front yard was deserted. We walked west, which I only knew because the sun had started its late-afternoon decline.

"How's your room?" I asked.

"It's nice."

"Anything's nice compared to a Peruvian jail," I said.

"I was comparing it to my room at home." Her eyes immediately darkened. Her homesickness was taking a deeper and deeper toll. I reached out and took her hand.

"Where do you think we are?" she asked.

I looked around. "I don't know. It looks like Texas."

"Have you ever been to Texas?"

"No."

"Me neither," she said. "But I was thinking Texas too. Or Arizona."

We walked to the end of the Ranch House, then followed it around back. About fifty yards behind the building was a stable.

"Horses," Taylor said. As we walked toward them she said, "It's good to see your mother again."

"I wish your parents were here," I said. "I'm sure you'll see them soon."

Taylor didn't speak for a moment; then she said softly, "I don't think so. We're headed to Asia. Who knows if we'll ever come back?"

"I wouldn't go if I didn't think we'd come back."

She shook her head. "You'd still go. You're a hero that way." She looked back at me. "Do you think Taiwan will be as bad as Peru?"

"What do you mean by 'bad'?"

"Dangerous."

"I don't know," I said, then added, "But at least the food's got to be better."

She grinned. "I like Chinese food."

When we got to the stable, Taylor walked up to an Appaloosa colt standing next to a railing. "Hey, baby," she said. She rubbed the horse's nose and he nuzzled against her. "I love horses. When I was little I tried to talk my parents into getting me one, but it was too expensive."

"How much does a horse cost?"

"It depends on what kind. But it's not just the cost of buying one, it's also the upkeep—like feeding it and the stable rental. On my father's police salary, that wasn't going to happen." She sighed. "In my dream world I'd live on a ranch like this with a hundred acres of horse property, and every day I would go riding." She turned back and looked at me. "You love me."

"You read my mind," I said.

"I don't have to. You show me." In spite of what she'd just said, she looked sad. "I think it's strange that I don't have to guess anyone's feelings and everyone else in the world has to."

"You're lucky."

"Not always." She looked into my eyes. "Sometimes I wish you could read my mind. Sometimes it's hard explaining how I feel."

The way she said that made my heart ache. "How do you feel?"

She looked down for a moment, then back into my eyes. "When I was kidnapped, I kept telling myself that it was just a matter of time before I'd be rescued and things would go back to the way they were—cheerleading, after-game parties, hanging out with my friends at the Bagelmeister... ." Her eyes filled with tears. "I've finally realized that there is no going back."

"We'll go back someday," I said.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Even if the Elgen and Hatch and all the bad guys in the world just disappeared, we still couldn't go back. We can go back to our homes and families, but it won't be the same. It never

will be. The world didn't change, we did. We've seen too much evil. We grew up too fast." She covered her eyes with her hand and began to cry. I put my arms around her and pulled her into me. She laid her head on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Without looking up she said, "I never even went to a prom."

I held her until the sun began to dip below the western mountain range. We didn't talk, though a few times I purposely thought things knowing that she would hear them. Finally I said, "We'd better go back. We have that reception."

Taylor wiped her eyes. "All right."

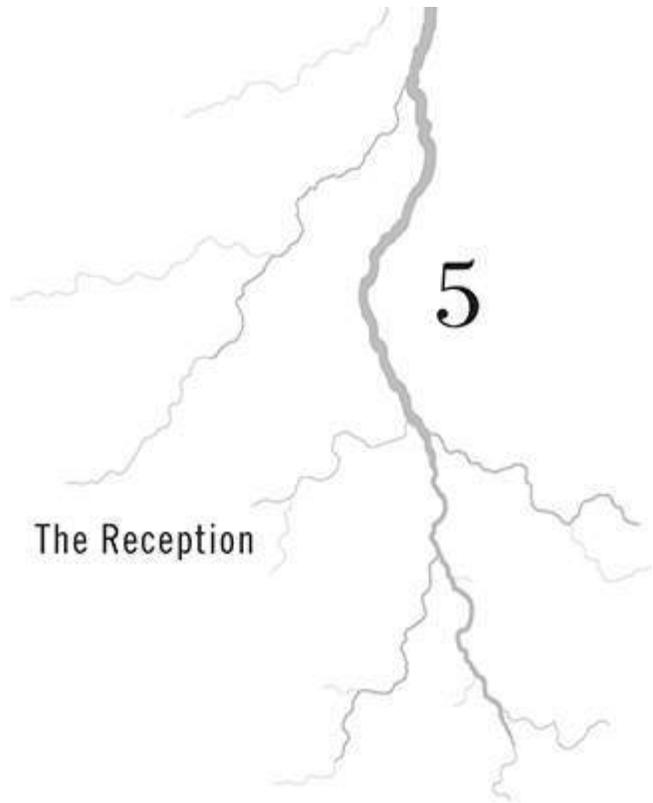
We walked back to the Ranch House in silence. We stopped outside her bedroom door and I looked into her beautiful face. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head. "I probably look like I've been bawling."

"You're entitled," I said. I took her hand. "I'll talk to these guys about your parents. Maybe they can do something. They owe us, right?"

"Thank you." She leaned forward and kissed me. "I'll see you in an hour." As I turned to go she said, "I love you too, Michael."

I turned back. "I know. I still don't believe it, but I know."



After showering I dressed in some of the new clothes they had brought, then lay back on my bed, waiting for them to come for us. Ostin was still snoring like a bandsaw. As I lay there listening to him, all I could think about was what Taylor had said about never going back. She was right. I suppose I hadn't thought as much about it as she had because I wasn't really giving up anything. Everyone I cared about was here.

About ten minutes later someone knocked on our door. "Mr. Vey, Mr. Liss. It's time for the reception."

"C'mon, Ostin," I said, sitting up. "It's time."

"Time for what?" he said groggily.

"To go to the reception."

He yawned loudly, then rolled over. "There'd better be food at this thing."

* * *

By the time we walked out of our room, everyone else was already standing in the hallway. Zeus, McKenna, Abigail, and Ian were talking to Tanner.

Taylor walked up to me and took my hand. She looked like she was feeling a little better. Or at least she was doing a better job of hiding her pain. “Did you see Tanner?” she asked.

“I talked to him this afternoon.”

“I hardly recognized him,” she said. “He doesn’t even look like the same person.”

“That’s exactly what I said.”

Just then Tanner walked over to us. “Hey, Taylor. Mike.”

“I was just saying how great you look,” Taylor said.

“You look great too. Want to go out?”

Taylor grinned. “Flattered, but you’ll have to ask my boyfriend.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I said.

“Even after I dropped those helicopter gunships?”

“Even,” I said.

He laughed. “Like my father used to say, if you don’t ask, the answer is always no.” He leaned in closer and his voice lowered. “Have you guys seen Zeus?”

“We see him every day,” I said.

“I mean, *postshower*. He, like, doesn’t stink. He smells good.”

“We’ll go right over and sniff him,” Taylor said wryly.

Just then a voice from the end of the hall said, “You all clean up nicely.” We all looked over to see Joel walking up the corridor. “Are we missing anyone?”

“Just me,” Grace said, walking out of her room.

“Grace!” Tessa shouted. The girls hugged. “Where have you been?” Tessa asked.

“You know, after these guys took down the academy, I thought I’d come here for a while. How about you? I hear you’ve been hanging out in the jungle.”

“It’s true,” Tessa said proudly. “I’ve been eating mashed tree larvae and fishing for piranha.”

“That’s crazy,” Grace said.

“Seeing you is crazy,” Tessa replied.

Like Tanner, Grace also looked different to me. Lighter. Healthier. I suppose being away from Hatch had that effect on people.

“The reunions are just beginning,” Joel said. “Let’s go to the party.”

I was pleased to hear that the event had been upgraded from a reception to a party. We followed Joel back down the hallway, through a set of double doors, then outside to another building. The night air was cool and filled with the song of crickets.

“Is there food at this thing?” Ostin asked.

“What kind of a celebration would it be without food?” Joel replied. “I promise, there will be more than you can eat, including what may be the best steak you’ve ever had. It’s dry-aged from range-fed beef raised right here on our ranch.”

“I’m so happy,” Ostin said.

“Good, because tonight is in your honor,” Joel said. “Have a good time.”

I took Taylor’s hand. “That’s an *order*,” I whispered.

“Yes, it is,” Joel said. I blushed, embarrassed that he’d heard me. He looked at Taylor. “I’m certain that Ms. Ridley will have an especially good time. In fact, I think I can guarantee it.”

He doesn’t know what he’s guaranteed, I thought.

We stopped outside another set of double doors and Joel waited until everyone had caught up. “Are you ready?”

“Let’s do this,” Ian said, already knowing what was behind the doors.

Joel opened the doors, exposing a large dining hall filled with people. At the sight of us everyone burst into applause.

My mother was standing near the doorway, waiting to greet us, a broad smile on her face. “This is for you, my heroes.”

We walked into the festivities. The room was decorated with crepe paper and balloons and a large sign that said WELCOME HEROES.

We were swarmed by people who wanted to shake our hands. After just a few minutes my mother pulled Taylor and me aside. “Taylor, are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes. This is really great.”

My mother just looked at her. “You can tell me the truth.”

Taylor half smiled. “I thought *I* was the mind reader.”

“I’m a mother,” she said. “I have intuition.”

Taylor looked down. “I miss my family.”

My mother nodded knowingly. “Of course you do. But not for much longer.”

“What?”

“Didn’t Joel tell you? They’re working on bringing your parents here.” Taylor threw her arms around my mother. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

My mother laughed. “It’s the least they could do, right?”

Taylor’s reaction filled me with both relief and joy.

A minute later Ostin walked over to us, dragging his parents with him. They all looked as happy as almonds in chocolate.

“Michael, honey,” Mrs. Liss said. “It’s so very good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too,” I said. It was. As eccentric as Ostin’s mother was, I really liked her. She had always been good to me.

Ostin grinned mischievously. “I told them how we went back home and there were Elgen guards inside our apartment.”

“You boys have had some excitement,” Mrs. Liss said, not looking very happy about the fact.

“I’m watching out for him,” I said.

“We know, Michael,” Mr. Liss said. “Don’t think we don’t appreciate it.”

Ostin squinted. “Who’s watching over whom?”

“You’re not watching over his diet,” Mrs. Liss said. “He’s not eating enough. I hardly recognized him. He’s wasting away.”

“Ruth,” Mr. Liss said. “He’s becoming a man.”

McKenna sidled up to Ostin. “Are these your parents?”

“I’m sorry,” Ostin said, realizing he’d abandoned her. “This is McKenna. She’s my ...” He hesitated.

“I’m his girlfriend,” McKenna said.

Ostin’s father looked both surprised and happy with the announcement. Mrs. Liss looked stunned. There was an awkward silence. “You’re very pretty,” Mrs. Liss finally said, making it sound like a bad thing. “Are you Japanese?”

Ostin groaned with embarrassment. “She’s American, Mom.”

“I’m Chinese-American,” McKenna said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Mr. Liss said, shaking McKenna’s hand.

Mrs. Liss said nothing, eyeing McKenna the way a boxer eyes an opponent before a match.

McKenna seemed unfazed. “It’s a pleasure meeting you both as well.”

Just then Taylor screamed so loudly the whole room stopped. “Mom!”

I turned around to see Mrs. Ridley standing in the open doorway. For a moment she just stared at Taylor in disbelief, then she shouted, “My baby!”

The two of them ran to each other and embraced. Mrs. Ridley held Taylor tightly, crying over and over, “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe you’re really here.”

I turned to my mom, who was watching them joyfully. “Did you know Mrs. Ridley was already here?”

“I knew they had gone to get her,” she said, her eyes still fixed on them. “She must have just arrived.”

“Why didn’t you tell her?”

She turned to me with a wise expression on her face. “Would you have wanted to spoil that surprise?”

After Taylor and her mother parted, Taylor brought her mother to me. “Mom, this is Michael, my boyfriend.”

“We met once before,” she said. “Your father and I went to his apartment after you disappeared.”

I remembered that night well. Mr. and Mrs. Ridley had come to my apartment to see if I knew where Taylor was. I suddenly felt embarrassed. “I wasn’t lying, I ...”

“You don’t need to explain,” Mrs. Ridley said. “I’ve been briefed about everything. I don’t know how to thank you for rescuing my daughter.” She looked at Taylor and broke down crying again. “I’m never going to let you out of my sight again. Never, never, never again.”

No one has told her about Taiwan, I thought.

About ten minutes later there was a loud squeal from a microphone, then Joel said, “Good evening and welcome, everyone. There are some happy reunions going on tonight and I won’t keep you from them. I just wanted to inform you that dinner is ready, so if everyone will find a seat, we’ll begin serving.”

My mother and I sat down at a table for eight with McKenna, the Lisses, Taylor, and her mother. After we were seated I asked Taylor’s mom, “Where’s Mr. Ridley?”

“He’s at home,” she said.

“He couldn’t come?”

“If he knew Taylor was here he would have definitely come. He thinks I’m on a business trip for my travel company. In fact, until two hours ago, so did I.”

“What do you mean?” Taylor asked.

“A few days ago, a woman came into my office. She said she represented a very wealthy Arizona businessman who was looking for someone to handle his company’s travel, but wanted to meet me first. She said he would send his private jet. So just a little after noon we flew out from Boise. I thought we were headed to Scottsdale, Arizona, not wherever this place is.”

“You don’t know where we are either?” Taylor asked.

She shook her head. “Just an idea. It looks like Texas, but it could be Southern Arizona, New Mexico, or even Mexico. So after four hours in the air I asked the woman where we were. All she said was, ‘On course.’”

“It was only after the plane had landed on a private landing strip and these guys with guns met us that I began to panic. That’s when the woman told me that they were taking me to see my daughter.” She teared up. “At first I thought they had kidnapped me, too. But then on the drive here they explained things. It was all so strange, but when they told me that Taylor had these *powers* ...” She turned to Taylor. “This is still so hard to believe—not just what is going on in the world, but that you can do what they say you can. Is it true?”

Taylor nodded. “Yes.”

“Honey, why didn’t you just tell us?”

“I was scared. It took me years to understand my powers, and once I finally did I didn’t know how to tell you.” She looked at me. “When I saw Michael use his powers it was the first time I thought someone might understand.”

“It’s lucky she met you,” Mrs. Ridley said to me.

“Lucky for me,” I said.

* * *

The dinner was as good as Joel promised. We had tomato and onion salad, sautéed mushrooms, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potato and pecan casserole, and huge T-bone steaks. While we were eating, Joel walked up to our table. “Is everyone having a good time?”

My mother looked up at him with a large smile. “Everything is wonderful. Thank you.”

A similar smile crossed his face. The way they looked at each other made me wonder if there was more to their relationship.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Ridley said. “For bringing us together.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Joel replied. He looked at Taylor. “I guaranteed you an especially good evening. Was I right?”

“Yes, sir,” Taylor said. “Thank you.”

“It’s the least we could do.” He looked back over the table, his gaze again settling on my mother. “I’ll let you enjoy your meals. But, sincerely, thank you for all you’ve done.” He turned and walked off to another table.

About a half hour later the servers brought out coffee and a dessert of fresh berries with sweet cream, and Joel lifted the microphone again. “I hope you’ve all had a good time this evening. It’s getting late and we start early tomorrow, so it’s about time we wrapped things up. Tomorrow morning we will be meeting in this same room at eight o’clock for breakfast. For those assigned to Operation Jade Dragon, which includes all of our young guests, please come dressed and ready for your first briefing. Thank you again, and good night.”

A few minutes later we all got up from the table. After telling everyone good night, I walked my mother to her room in the eastern wing of the Ranch House.

“You know, what Joel said earlier about you being a hero is true,” my mother said. “Your father would have been just as proud of you as I am.” She looked me in the eyes. “But remember, you’re still my son. You don’t have to save the world.”

“What if I’m the only one who can?”

Her expression was a mix of pride and sadness. “That’s something you’re going to have to answer yourself.”

* * *

By the time I got back to my room the lights were out and Ostin was already asleep. At least I thought he was. As I quietly undressed and slipped into bed, Ostin said, “Good night.”

“Good night,” I answered. After a moment I added, “It was cool seeing your parents tonight.”

“Yeah. It was. Sleep well.”

“You too.”

I had just closed my eyes when Ostin blurted out, “Did you know that the first woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize was from Taiwan?”

I think that could have waited until morning, I thought. “No.”

“Did you know that Taiwan’s national sport is American baseball? In 1995 they won the Little League World Series in the U.S.”

“No,” I said again. “Didn’t know that either.” For a moment I lay there wondering why he was sharing these random factoids—not that this was unprecedented for Ostin. I sometimes wondered if there was so much information in his head that it occasionally just burst out. At my thirteenth birthday party I was about to blow out the candles on my cake when he said, “Did you know that Stalin tried to create a humanzee—a hybrid of men and chimpanzees—hoping to create ape-men superwarriors?”

Suddenly it occurred to me why he was pelting me with facts about Taiwan. “Are you worried about Taiwan?”

“A little,” he said quietly. “Are you?”

“I’m always worried.”

“You don’t act like it.”

“I’m just good at faking.” I was quiet a moment, then said, “You know, you don’t have to go.”

“If you go, I go.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

More silence.

“Michael.”

“Yeah?”

“Something’s really been bothering me.”

“What’s that?”

He hesitated for such a long time that for a moment I thought he’d fallen back asleep. “I know Hatch is a demon and all that, but what if he’s right?”

“Right about what?”

“About making an electric species.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “Why would he be right?”

“Everything evolves. That’s how nature survives. What if an electric species is the natural evolution of humans?”

“There’s nothing natural about what Hatch is doing.”

“But wouldn’t the world be a better place if we didn’t have to worry about electricity anymore?”

“Better for whom? The humans the Elgen kill or the ones they enslave?”

“You’re right.”

“It’s not electric power I’m worried about. Hatch doesn’t care about the world or clean energy or a better species. He uses those things to

manipulate people into doing what he wants them to do. Just think how much oil those boats of his need. He probably uses more oil in a second than most people use in three or four lifetimes.”

“You’re right,” Ostin said. “It’s subterfuge.”

“Exactly,” I said. *Whatever that means.* “Good night.”

“Night,” he echoed. I had almost fallen asleep when he said, “Michael.”

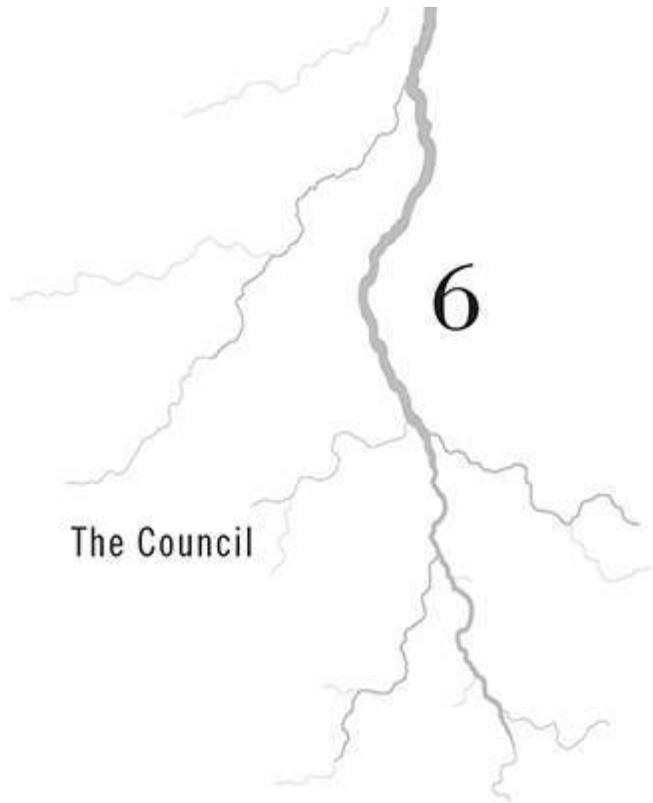
“Yeah?”

“You won’t tell anyone I said that, will you?”

“No.”

“Okay. Good night.”

“Good night,” I said, rolling over. Now my eyes were open. I was ticking. *What if the devil was right?*



When I woke the next morning Ostin was dressed and sitting cross-legged on his bed, reading. “Did you hear that rooster?” he asked. “It was crowing at like four in the morning.”

“No, I was too tired.”

“If I were you I would have thrown a lightning ball at it.”

“Should have,” I said.

Actually, I felt more rested than I had in days. It was the first time I’d gone through an entire night without having a nightmare since we’d sunk the *Ampere*. “What time is it?”

“It’s after seven. I was about to wake you up. Breakfast is in a half hour.”

“I’m going to shower,” I said. I grabbed some clothes, then walked into the bathroom. A hot shower is one of those luxuries you don’t think about until you’ve been deprived of it. I stood under the water until Ostin banged on the door.

“It’s time to go,” he shouted.

“I’ll meet you there,” I said. “Save me some food.”

* * *

By the time I arrived for breakfast the dining room was crowded. Taylor waved to me as I entered. She was sitting at a table next to both of our mothers. Ostin was sitting with his parents at the table behind them. The rest of our group, including Tanner and Grace, was sitting together.

Taylor got up to meet me. "Good morning, sunshine."

"Looks like I'm the last one here," I said.

"As usual," she said, smiling. "The food's over there. You just help yourself."

The food was served buffet-style from long tables at one end of the room. There was thick bacon and sausage, scrambled eggs, hash browns with cheese and red and green peppers, and blueberry pancakes. I loaded up with everything, then, after saying hi to the rest of our group, sat down next to my mother.

"How did you sleep?" my mom asked.

"Good. I didn't hear the four a.m. rooster alarm."

"I did," Taylor said. "It went on for like ten minutes before I rebooted it."

"You rebooted a rooster?"

"I think so. It stopped mid-crow."

"You should eat," my mother said. "The food here is really good. They grow everything. Even the wild blueberries in the pancakes. They're completely off the grid."

"This is where I want to be for the zombie apocalypse," Taylor said.

"Or the Elgen one," I said. I looked at Taylor's mother. "How are you, Mrs. Ridley?"

"Thank you for asking," she said. "I woke this morning thinking I had dreamed it all."

"Sometimes I still do too," I said. I took a bite of blueberry pancake. It was delicious.

"Tell us about Peru," Mrs. Ridley said. "And this tribe you were with."

"You should let him eat," Taylor said.

"It's okay," I said. "I wasn't with the Amacarra that long. But they were good to me. They saved me from the Elgen."

"I'd like to meet them someday," my mother said.

"You can't," I said, frowning. "They don't exist anymore. The Elgen and the Peruvian army wiped them out for helping us."

Her expression fell. "I'm so sorry. That's horrible."

"It's hard to believe that their entire civilization is gone," I said.

"If Hatch has his way that will be true of all of us," Taylor said.

Just the mention of Hatch's name brought a cloud over the table.

As we finished eating, Joel walked in. He greeted a few people, then went to the front of the room. "Excuse me, I have an announcement. For members of the Electroclan, we'll be meeting in this same room at nine thirty, so you'll have a little time to go back to your rooms or walk around the grounds before then, but please don't be late. Thank you."

As soon as he finished he headed to our table. I again noticed the unspoken interaction between him and my mother.

"Good morning," he said to all of us. Then he turned to me. "Michael, before things get started, the council would like to meet with you."

"What's the council?" I asked.

"They're the leadership of the resistance," my mother said.

"They're waiting in the conference room right now," Joel said.

"They're waiting for me?"

"Yes. As soon as you're ready."

I glanced at Taylor. "What about everyone else?"

"This time they'd just like to see you," Joel said.

I stood. "All right. Let's go."

My mother and I followed Joel back to the Ranch House, then across the main room, through a doorway, and down the central wing. At the end of the hallway Joel opened a door for me. "Go on in," he said.

I stepped into a large, sparse room with a long, oval table with nearly a dozen people sitting around it. They all stood as I entered. I recognized most of them from the night before, but with the exception of Joel and Sydney Lynn, I hadn't known who they were.

The man at the head of the table walked toward me. He was a little older than the others, handsome with graying temples. He extended his hand. "Michael, welcome. I'm Simon."

"You're not the voice," I said.

He shook his head. "No. I'm not. I'm the council chairman."

"You're the main guy?"

He smiled. "I am here. The council runs most of the day-to-day operations of the resistance, but the overall leadership is elsewhere. The threat and power of the Elgen is such that it's vital that we not keep all our

eggs in the same basket. The council communicates with the voice, who directs operations from a confidential location.”

“I’d just like to meet this person who keeps asking us to risk our lives,” I said. “I think it’s only fair.”

“And so you shall,” Simon said. “When the time is right. Please, have a seat at the table.”

I sat down alongside Joel and my mom. Everyone else sat down as well.

“Welcome to the Timepiece Ranch,” Simon said. “We have many questions for you, and I’m certain you have many for us as well. So please, if there’s anything you would like to ask first, go right ahead.”

I looked around the room, then said, “Where did you all come from?”

Simon smiled at my forthrightness. “That’s a good question,” he said. “The great physicist Newton said, ‘To each action there is an equal and opposite reaction.’ Simply put, we are the reaction to the rise of the Elgen.”

“But who started *this*?”

Simon hesitated, then leaned toward me. “Your father was the founder.”

I glanced at my mother, who nodded. “My father?”

“He was the first to realize what the Elgen had done. Back in those days, the Elgen’s goals were different than what they are today. They were all financial. Our group started when your father realized that everyone who was involved with the Elgen’s initial MEI tests was in danger and he began gathering us to protect one another. I was one of the original members of that group as well. Almost everyone at this table was somehow involved with those tests. The Elgen brought us together by giving us something in common—they threatened our lives.”

My head spun a little. “I can’t believe this is all because of my father.”

“I understand,” Simon said. “What other questions do you have?”

“Why is everything such a secret?”

“Anonymity has always been our greatest weapon. Up until a few weeks ago, the Elgen didn’t even know that we existed. Now they do. If they knew where we are right now, they would hunt us down and, if possible, destroy us.

“We keep things secret for your safety as well as ours. As you well know, the Elgen are not above torturing for information. That’s why we don’t know the whereabouts of the voice. But we communicate what we know to the voice and he guides us. This way, if something were to happen

to us, the resistance would continue. It must continue. Failure is not an option. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If we fail, the world will fall into a state of captivity it has never before experienced—not in its thousands of years of recorded history. It would be Orwellian.”

“So what is it that you do?”

“Whatever we need to do to hinder the Elgen,” he replied. “We began purely as a means of self-defense. We tracked the Elgen’s movements. As they grew, we began to infiltrate their organization. Of course I can’t tell you where or who our informants are, but when the *Ampere* exploded, one of our people was killed.”

I began ticking. “We ... we killed one of the good guys?”

Simon shook his head. “It couldn’t be helped.”

“But if we knew they were there ...”

“You didn’t,” Simon said. “As it was, you barely escaped with your lives. There was no way we could have alerted you. He died in the explosion, but whether the *Ampere* was destroyed or not, he would have died. Hatch had discovered who he was. He would have tortured and killed him. In that way, you did him a favor. He died instantly.”

I was still ticking. Simon leaned forward. “Son, this is not your concern. Our agent knew the risk he was taking and he was willing to accept it. Just as you and your friends have risked your lives. Just as Wade *gave* his life. This is war. Lives have been lost. And unfortunately, more will be lost before it is all over.”

Simon looked around the table at the other council members, then said, “Michael, we asked you here this morning so we could explain where we are in our struggle. Throughout history there have been men who have launched movements that have changed the world. Men like Genghis Khan or Adolf Hitler. At one point in their climb to power all of these men could have been stopped. But once their plans gained momentum, no one could stop them until their revolution had run its course. It is a cycle too familiar in history. By the time the world starts taking these revolutions seriously, it’s already too late. They are like pythons in the jungle. The smallest child can crush a python egg. But let the snake hatch and grow and the python will squeeze and devour the child.

“Dr. C. James Hatch and his Elgen are on such a trajectory. In the last six months Dr. Hatch has taken complete control of the Elgen organization. He has built an elite guard of highly trained soldiers more than two thousand strong. We believe this number will double in the next six months, then double again the next year. He has an army. And they’re better equipped than most police forces and militaries.

“Make no mistake, when the Elgen are ready, they will attempt to take over the world. The fact that they were prepared and willing to take over the country of Tuvalu demonstrates this.

“Last week in Lima, you and your Electroclan almost put an end to Hatch’s climb. Almost. If it weren’t for you he would have attacked and conquered the island nation of Tuvalu this week. I regret to inform you that he has not abandoned his original plans. You have slowed the Elgen but not stopped them. They will not be stopped so easily.

“In spite of your successes, we are losing this battle. The world views the Elgen as a blessing, because they promise them free, clean energy. They don’t know—they don’t *want* to know—the cost they will be forced to pay.

“I tell you this to prepare you. As you saw in Peru, you were not celebrated for liberating their country—you were demonized. That is often the way of heroes. And why, more times than not, we build monuments to those our fathers stoned. Someday you may be celebrated, but it might not be in your lifetime. Heroes are heroes precisely because they are willing to do what everyone else won’t—oppose the popular voice. But we will know what you have done. And in your heart, so will you. And that is more than heroic. It is noble.”

I let his words sink in. “We’ll do our best,” I said.

Simon smiled. “And that is noble too.”



When I returned to the dining room the rest of the Electroclan was seated around two tables at one end of the room. A man I had never seen before was standing in front of them. He was dark-skinned, tall, and powerfully built. His hair was trimmed close to his scalp, revealing a thick scar that ran from the nape of his neck nearly to the top of his head. He had a narrow waist and biceps as large as my thighs. He reminded me of an action figure.

As I sat down he said with a slight Hispanic accent, “Welcome, Michael. We were waiting for you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “The council wanted to see me.”

“I was told.” He turned back toward the group. “Let’s begin. My name is Gervaso. You don’t need to know my last name, because we don’t use them here. First, let me say that it’s an honor to meet the brave young men and women of the Electroclan. I’ve been closely following your activities and what you have done is courageous and heroic. That’s precisely what it’s going to take to stop the Elgen.”

He put his hands behind his back. “Today, I am here to brief you on our enemy. To understand why the Elgen do what they do, it helps to understand their history. The Elgen Corporation was founded in 1984 as a medical products company specializing in electroanalgesia—the technology of relieving pain through nerve stimulation. Much like what our Abigail here does.”

We all looked at Abigail. She smiled and bowed.

“Their technology sounds modern, but in reality it is ancient science. More than two thousand years ago the Greek philosopher Socrates noticed that standing in a pool with some types of fish could produce numbing sensations. The Elgen’s first patent was for an electric nerve implant to stop back pain.

“As they experimented with electricity, a brilliant scientist named Dr. Steven R. Coonradt discovered the original science that the MEI technology is based on. Recognizing its potential, the Elgen Corporation brought on some significant investors to pursue the technology, which took nearly three years longer to develop than they had planned. The investors—former chairman Schema was one of them—became impatient, and the CEO of Elgen, Dr. Hatch, was pressured for results. Against Dr. Coonradt’s advice, the MEI was tested before it was ready. You know the results of that test as *you* are the results of that test. Seventeen surviving babies were born electric. The rest of the children born during that period died at birth or within days.

“It took only a few days for the Elgen to realize the connection between their experiments and the infant deaths and shut down the MEI. But there were others outside the Elgen Corporation who also made the connection. Not so coincidentally, these people mysteriously disappeared. Most of them died of electricity-related deaths.” He looked at me. “Carl Vey, Michael’s father, was one of those people.

“At this time, there was another important death. Dr. Coonradt, the only man who understood the science on which the MEI machine was built, also ‘disappeared.’ It was a grave mistake on the Elgen’s part but a blessing for the world. Had Dr. Coonradt lived he likely would have solved the problem with the MEI, and the Elgen would already be producing their new species.

“Faced with the possibility of lawsuits, the Elgen Corporation shut down the MEI project. The company was taken over by the investors and Schema became the new CEO. Dr. Hatch, who should have been thrown out, was

demoted to executive director. We don't know why he wasn't fired, but knowing how Dr. Hatch works, I would wager that he threatened to go public with the Elgen deaths, which would have no doubt resulted in massive lawsuits and destroyed the company.

“At any rate, Hatch remained involved with the Elgen. He was ordered to find and follow the remaining seventeen children just in case they began dying later as well.

“It was about five years after the MEI experiment that the first electric child was discovered. That was Nichelle. She was in foster care and had been sent from home to home. Her record showed that wherever she went the home suffered damage to its electrical system. A few of them burned down.

“Because she had no permanent home and a history of running away, she was easily taken in by the Elgen. They began running tests on her and discovered her power. That's when they began, without the board's consent, kidnapping the other electric children. As you know, the last to be found were Michael and Taylor.

“It was likely during this time that Dr. Hatch came up with the idea that the MEI could be used to create a super-race of humans. This is nothing new. Throughout history, others have tried to create a super-race. Unfortunately for Hatch, with Dr. Coonradt gone, their ongoing experiments with the MEI were largely unsuccessful, with one big exception—they accidentally discovered how to electrify rats.

“The timing of this ‘accident’ was fortunate for Hatch. The board had just become aware of Dr. Hatch's crimes and had resolved to terminate him. Instead, Hatch won them over with a small machine he had created called the Elecage—a prototype to the Starxource plants. Hatch demonstrated to the board how this dishwasher-size box was able to produce enough energy to power the entire Elgen building without pollution or fossil fuels and at a fraction of the cost of conventional energy sources.

“Chairman Schema and the board immediately recognized the potential of what Hatch had developed and the very real possibility of controlling the world's electricity. They would make trillions of dollars.

“Of course Hatch also realized the potential of his discovery, but he never lost sight of his original plan—to create a master race. Hatch still believes that he will someday be the father of a race that will dominate the world and rule the Nonels.”

“What’s a Nonel?” Jack asked.

“You’re a Nonel,” Gervaso said. “So am I. Nonel is the term Hatch uses to refer to nonelectric humans. It is ironic that Hatch himself *is* a Nonel.

“In the meantime, the Elgen have continued to build Starxource plants, which, for the most part, have been very successful. The Elgen are already earning more than seven billion dollars a year selling electricity. Hatch has used the plants’ success to appease the board over his continual experiments with producing more electric children—something most of the board was opposed to.

“Hatch knew that his conflict with the board would someday come to a head, so he prepared for it. He trained an army of Elgen guards with the stated purpose of protecting their Starxource plants, but his real reason was to someday take over the company, which is what he did less than a month ago.

“This brings us to where we are today. A few weeks ago a scientific paper surfaced online from the Chinese province of Shanxi. It was written by a Chinese scientist named Lin YuLong, which, translated to English, means ‘jade dragon.’

“The paper theorized that human DNA could be electrically altered through the use of magnetically altered electrons. As with many major discoveries, only a few understood the importance of the theory, and the paper was largely ignored by the scientific world. The first paper YuLong wrote hypothesized that the result would likely kill 71.43 percent of the species, which, remarkably, is within a half percent of the actual mortality rate of the MEI.

“Then YuLong claimed to have solved the problem, predicting a 0.003 percent mortality rate. Fortunately, the scientist did not divulge the mathematical formula used on the alteration.

“We immediately sent our Taiwanese associate to China to track down this scientist. We were surprised to discover that Jade Dragon wasn’t a scientist, but rather a nine-year-old girl, and that only days before she had been kidnapped.”

“How do you know that the Elgen kidnapped her?” Ostin asked.

“We don’t. But this is what we do know. First, we know that the Elgen desperately want the information she has. Second, we know that the Elgen Lung Li force was called to the Shanxi province of China just days before Jade Dragon disappeared.”

Ostin looked at me. “What’s a Lung Li?” he whispered. I shrugged.

“And third, we know that the *Volta*, the Elgen’s floating laboratory, has changed course and is now sailing to Taiwan. The pieces all fit.”

“Why would they need the *Volta*?” I asked.

“It’s where the original MEI is. And more important, it’s where their scientists are.”

“How long ago was she kidnapped?” Ostin asked.

“It’s been seven days.”

“Then it may already be too late,” Ostin said. “Once they have the information, it’s over.”

“We have hope that she will not turn the information over to them.”

“They’ll get it from her,” Jack said. “They’ll torture her.”

“You know better than anyone that the Elgen are not above torture—even with a child. But in the case of Jade Dragon it probably won’t do them any good. Jade Dragon is not only deaf and mute, she’s an autistic savant. She is, in all likelihood, extremely confused and frightened.”

“What’s a savant?” Abigail asked.

“Savants are highly gifted individuals capable of remarkable mental feats,” Gervaso said. “For instance, an American autistic savant named Kim Peek could read two pages of a book at the same time in about three seconds and memorize everything on them. Before he died, he had read more than twelve thousand books and could recite any of them word for word.

“Another savant is Leslie Lemke; he was born blind and with such severe birth defects that he didn’t learn how to walk until he was fifteen years old. When he was sixteen, his mother woke in the middle of the night to the sound of piano music and thought she’d left the television on. She discovered that it was her son. Even though Leslie had never had a single lesson, he was flawlessly playing a Tchaikovsky piano concerto after hearing it just once on the television.

“There are also reports of a savant who could learn a foreign language in less than a week, and another who could solve math equations as quickly as a calculator and recite pi up to twenty-eight thousand places.”

“Ostin, to how many places can you recite pi?” Abigail asked.

Ostin gulped. “Maybe a couple hundred.”

“You mean they’re even smarter than Ostin?” Zeus asked.

Ostin frowned.

“Perhaps in a specific field,” Gervaso said kindly. Ostin relaxed.

“How long until the *Volta* reaches Taiwan?” I asked.

“If she continues at her current speed, about two weeks. You’ll need to be in Taiwan well in advance to prepare.”

“So what do we do while we’re here?” Taylor asked.

“We’d like to work with you in developing your powers,” Gervaso said.

“Like the Elgen did,” Zeus said.

“I do not like the comparison, but yes. The Elgen are evil, not stupid.” Gervaso looked around the room. “Are there any more questions?”

“Is there a gym?” Jack asked.

“Yes. It’s in building C, near the silos. There’s also a pool and hot tub.”

“That’s where we’re headed,” Tessa said.

“By ‘we’ you mean ‘you,’” Zeus said.

“I didn’t say you have to get in,” she replied.

“If there are no more questions,” Gervaso said, “I think that’s enough for now. You have the rest of the day free. I’ll see you here tomorrow morning at nine thirty. Have a good day.”

Gervaso stopped me on the way out. “Michael, I’d like to try something with your powers. Would that be all right?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll meet you here after lunch.”

As we walked from the room Ostin said to me, “I know what I’m going to do to prepare.”

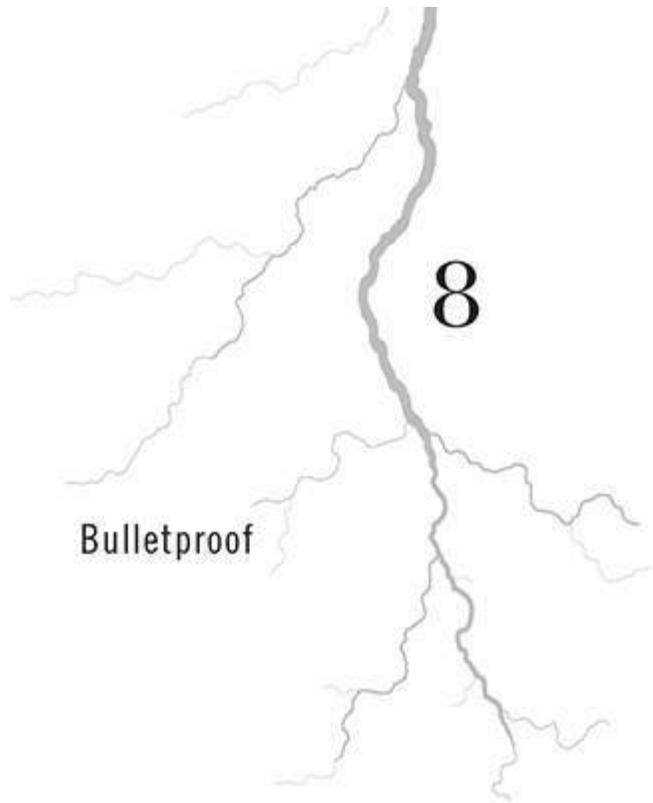
“What?” I asked.

“I’m going to learn Chinese.”

“In one week?”

“Probably not all of it,” he said. Then added, “I’m not a savant.”

I patted him on the back. “Trust me, you’re close enough.”



Lunch was fried chicken, mashed potatoes with white gravy, and a homemade soda the lunch lady called sarsaparilla, which tasted like root beer. Taylor and I sat next to Jack and Abigail.

“So what’s the story on this Gervaso guy?” I asked. “He looks like a Marine.”

“He’s tougher than that,” Jack said. “He was Delta Force, the army’s elite tactical-combat and antiterrorist unit. They only take the best of the best. They’re trained in marksmanship, demolition and entry, hostage rescue, espionage, surveillance, and diplomatic protection. He’s like a one-man army.”

“Like you,” Abigail said to Jack. He smiled.

Taylor looked at Jack for a moment, then asked, “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” he said. Then he flinched a little. “You mean, with Wade?”

Taylor nodded. “Yes.”

“I miss him.”

“We do too,” I said.

Jack took a deep breath, then said, “Around four summers ago I went over to Wade’s house. He was still living with his old man back then. I didn’t get along with his father, so I usually just went around back and climbed in through Wade’s window.

“This time, after I climbed inside, I couldn’t find Wade. Then I heard him. He was in his closet. There was blood all over the floor and his face and his eyes were nearly swollen shut. His father had almost beaten him to death. I helped him out and wiped off some of the blood, then I went out looking for his dad. I was only like fifteen, but I was already more than six feet and a hundred and ninety pounds. His father was a little man. He was drunk, sitting on the floor in the hall.

“The dude came at me with a bottle. I was crazy mad. I knocked him down, then started waling on him. Then Wade shouted, ‘Stop! Please stop.’ He had crawled out of his room to save his father. If it wasn’t for Wade I might have killed that drunk.” Jack slowly shook his head. “I was so pumped with adrenaline that I lifted the guy with one hand and shoved him against the wall. I told him if he ever touched Wade again that the next time I wouldn’t stop.” Jack looked down. “Child services took Wade out of the house the next week.”

Abigail reached over and took Jack’s hand.

“From then on, I felt like it was my job to protect him. That’s what I can’t get over. Failing him.” Jack looked into my eyes. “I relive his death over and over. If I could just have those five minutes back. Just five minutes ...”

Taylor’s eyes welled up. “I’m so sorry.”

Jack looked up at her. “Can you take the pain away from me? Like you did with Zeus?”

Taylor frowned. “Maybe. But I’d have to take away all your memories of Wade. Do you really want to forget him?”

Jack thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head. “No. It’s all I have left of him.” He put his hand over his eyes.

Abigail put her arm around Jack. I think she was using her power because I noticed that he relaxed a bit. We finished eating in silence.

* * *

About fifteen minutes later Gervaso walked into the dining room looking for me. “Are you ready?”

“Sure. How long will we be?”

“About half an hour.”

“I’ll be in my room,” Taylor said. “Come find me when you’re done.”

I followed Gervaso outside the dining hall to a warehouse near the stables. He grabbed a green metal ammo box from a shelf, and then we got in one of the jeeps and drove about a half mile from the house to a shooting range. There were targets scattered all over the terrain and the ground was littered with brass bullet casings. Gervaso parked the jeep next to a gun mounted on a turret.

“Come,” he said. We walked about a hundred feet to a round bull’s-eye mounted to a bale of hay. “I’ve been speaking with Jaime,” he said. “He told me that he saw you push an army truck with your magnetism. Is that true?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t moving too fast; it was in a convoy.”

“I want to try something. When I say ‘now,’ I want you to push like you did that jeep. That direction,” he said, pointing away from me.

“What do you want me to push?”

“Just the air,” he said. “Don’t move, just push when I tell you to. Understand?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Stand right here,” he said, moving me toward the target. He turned and walked back to the mounted gun, then looked through the gun’s scope and put his finger on the trigger. The gun was pointing right at me.

“Wait!” I shouted. “You’re not going to shoot that thing at me are you?”

“Not at you. The target.”

“Yeah, and I’m like six inches away from the target. No offense, but I don’t know how good of a shot you are.”

“It won’t hit you. The gun’s been calibrated to hit the target dead center each time.”

“This is crazy,” I mumbled. “How many bullets?”

“This is an M16 automatic, so I’m going to fire a thirty-round clip.”

I stepped back. “Wait, you didn’t tell me you’re firing a freaking *machine gun* at me. What if you’re off a few inches?”

“Don’t worry, they’d definitely fire me if I killed you.”

I just stared at him.

He grinned. “I’m joking.” He looked back through the scope. “I’ve already tested more than three hundred rounds.”

Shaking my head, I stepped back toward the target. “Whatever.”

“Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I said. I started ticking, blinking my right eye.

“Are you ready?” he repeated.

“All right. Ready!” I shouted.

“Now!”

I pulsed. Fire leaped from the gun barrel as it spit bullets toward the target. I suppose I was pretty hyped up from adrenaline because I pulsed hard enough to knock over a metal ammo box almost twenty yards away.

“Clear!” Gervaso shouted. He raised his head from the gun as smoke drifted up from its barrel.

I stepped back and examined the target. None of the bullets had hit the bull’s-eye. Not one. “I thought you said this thing was calibrated!” I shouted.

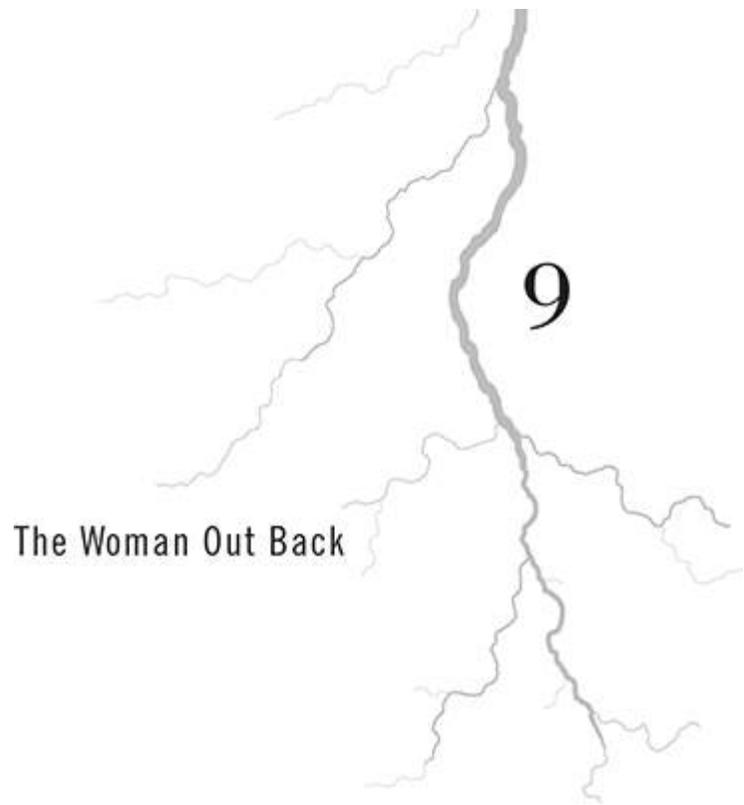
Gervaso walked up to the target, counting the holes as he approached. “You’re right. Only eight of thirty rounds even hit on the target.”

“You could have killed me,” I said, still ticking.

“No,” he said calmly. “Not if I wanted to.” He ran his finger down the target, then looked back at me. “The gun wasn’t off. You moved those bullets.”

“You’re saying it’s my fault you missed?”

He smiled. “I’m saying that with a little more practice, you’re going to be bulletproof.”



That night after dinner I went out for a walk. I wanted to be alone. No, I *needed* to be alone. Since the moment we'd left Peru I hadn't had much privacy, and I had a lot to think about. I suppose that I needed some solitude to let everything settle before I took on the next phase of my bizarre new life. I think Taylor must have understood because she didn't say anything as I slipped out the back.

Even though the sun had set an hour earlier, it was still warm outside and the compound grounds were lit by a nearly full moon. I walked over to the helipad to look at the helicopter, then wandered farther back to where Taylor and I had talked the night before.

As I approached the stable I thought I heard someone crying. I walked quietly around the side of the Ranch House to see a woman leaning against the fence. The moon's illumination was bright enough that I could at least partially see her. She was older than me, probably in her late twenties, tall and thin with long dark hair that fell over half her face. I didn't remember seeing her at the reception.

She was crying. I felt awkward for intruding on her privacy, and I was about to turn back when she looked up at me with a startled expression. I think my glow must have frightened her. (If you've never seen one of us glow, it takes a little getting used to—just one of many reasons I was never allowed sleepovers as a child.) For a moment we just looked at each other.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She wiped her eyes. “You’re one of *them*.”

Them? I wasn’t sure how to respond. Finally I said, “Sorry, I’ll leave you alone.”

As I turned to leave she said, “I’m crying for my husband.”

I turned back. “Your husband?”

“He was killed in action.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

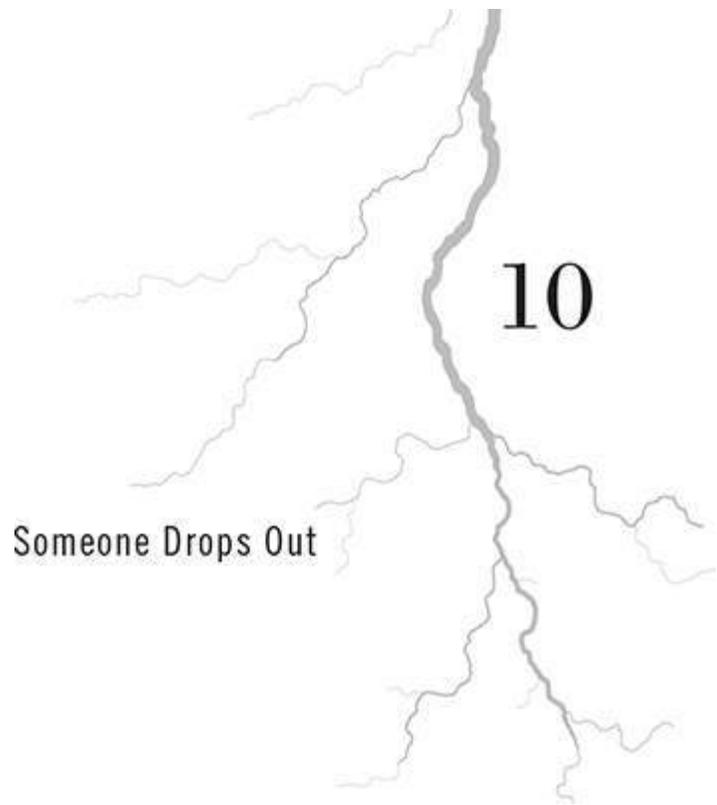
For a moment she just looked at me with dark, angry eyes. Then she said, “You should be. You killed him.”

Her words rolled over me like a train. “I didn’t kill your husband.”

“He was on the *Ampere* when you blew it up.”

For several moments I was speechless. Finally I said again, “I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” she said. She wiped her eyes, then turned and walked back to the house.



I woke in the night drenched in sweat. I had dreamed about the *Ampere* again. This time I was trying to save someone trapped inside, but the smoke and flames and the force of the water kept me back. I wasn't sure who it was, I just knew it was someone important to me. When I finally got to them they were underwater, drowned, their limbs and hair floating, lifeless. Then I saw the person's face. It was white and swollen, and his eyes were wide open. It was me.

It took me several hours to fall asleep again. I felt like I'd only slept a few minutes when Ostin woke me.

"Michael, it's time to get up."

"You've got to be kidding," I groaned. "I didn't sleep."

"More nightmares?"

"Yeah."

"Just stay in bed. I'll tell them you're sick."

I rubbed my eyes. "No, I've got to get up."

As I gathered myself, Ostin sat back on his bed. "Where were you last night?"

“I went for a walk.”

“With who?”

“Just me.”

Ostin frowned. “I thought you were with Taylor. Why didn’t you come get me?”

“I wanted to be alone.”

He looked at me with concern. “Is something wrong?”

“Yeah.” I exhaled slowly. “Does it ever bother you about what we did to the *Ampere*?”

“We did what we had to do.”

“I know. But all those lives ... there were innocent people on that boat.”

“Not so innocent,” he said. “If you take the beast’s money, you are part of the beast. That’s the way war is. There is no middle ground.” He leaned forward. “We either stopped the Elgen from enslaving and killing more people or we didn’t. That’s the only issue.” He looked at me quizzically. “Did something happen last night?”

“On my walk I met a woman. Her husband was on the *Ampere* when we blew it up. She said we killed him.”

Ostin nodded slowly. “No wonder.” He looked me in the eyes. “Listen, if he was on the *Ampere*, he knew what was going on. In fact, he might have been the one who told them that we had to sink the boat. He accepted the risk, just like we did. We almost died on that boat.”

“But we didn’t.”

“No, we got lucky.” He seemed to study me for a moment, then he said, “What you’re feeling is called survivor’s guilt. It happens in war. But you can’t blame yourself for the chaos of war. You stood up to the bully to protect someone else. You didn’t do it because you wanted to or for personal gain. You didn’t act carelessly. You did it to protect others. That makes you a hero and no matter how awful war is, that doesn’t change that fact. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Especially yourself.”

I pondered his words for a moment, then said, “Thanks, buddy.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” he said. “Now can we get some breakfast?”

* * *

After another big breakfast we met with Gervaso again. This time he had a map of the island of Taiwan taped to the wall behind him.

“Today we’re going to talk about your mission. We now have positive verification from our informants that Jade Dragon is being held at the Taiwan Starxource plant, waiting for the *Volta*, the Elgen’s science boat, to arrive.” He walked over to his map. “The Starxource plant is located about here,” he said, touching a point on the map with his finger, “in southwest Taiwan, just a few kilometers northwest of the city of Kaohsiung, the second largest city in Taiwan.

“The Taiwan Starxource plant is the largest in the world. It does not have the landmass around it that the Peruvian plant had, but the facility itself is larger. Like the Peruvian plant, it is also an Elgen training center, which means there will be more guards than usual.”

We all groaned.

“Lovely,” Ostin said.

“It gets worse,” Gervaso said. “In addition to the Elgen, you will also be facing the Taiwanese army.”

“Just like the Peruvian army,” Zeus said.

“Not exactly. The Peruvian army is ranked fifty-ninth in the world. The Taiwanese army is ranked seventeenth, just below Canada. It is a much more powerful force.”

“Why are they involved?” I asked.

“For good reason. The Starxource plant is vital to Taiwan’s national security. Taiwan imports one hundred percent of their energy, so they are extremely vulnerable. After the destruction of the Peruvian plant, the Taiwanese army took up the defense of the plant.

“We do not recommend shutting down the Taiwanese plant if you can help it. It will cost many, many innocent lives if you do, and you will be regarded as terrorists. It is best if you just get into the plant, get the girl, and get out.”

“Did he really say ‘just’?” Tessa said.

“Piece of cake,” Jack said sarcastically.

“You’re saying that the nine of us are taking on the seventeenth-largest army in the world?” Taylor asked.

“*Eight* of you,” Gervaso said. “Abigail will not be going to Taiwan.”

We all looked over at her. Jack must have already known, because he was the only one who didn’t look surprised.

“This is at our insistence,” Gervaso said. “Her powers will not be useful in Taiwan. We do not want to risk any of your lives unnecessarily.”

“I’m sorry,” Abigail said, looking embarrassed.

“They’re right,” I said. “And if we’re taking on such a big force, we’re not going to succeed with numbers anyway.”

“You can say that again,” Ostin said.

“Exactly,” Gervaso said. “This must be a covert operation.”

Ostin raised his hand. “Yesterday you said something about the Lung Li. Who and what are they?”

Gervaso frowned. “The Lung Li is an elite branch of the Elgen guard made up of Asian mercenaries. They are mostly Chinese, but there are Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Thai members as well. *Lung Li*, in Chinese, means ‘dragon strength’ or ‘power.’ It’s fitting. They are a formidable group of warriors. They are highly disciplined, fierce fighters. They make the rest of the Elgen guard look like mall cops.”

“This just keeps getting better,” Taylor said.

“They are also highly superstitious,” Gervaso continued. “They follow astrology and ancient mysticism. They believe that the electric children are the literal reincarnation of the lightning gods of ancient Chinese legend.”

“So if I shock them crazy they’ll all be worshipping me,” Zeus said, grinning.

“I’m afraid not,” Gervaso said. “They regard the Electroclan as fallen angels. Demons.”

“That’s creepy,” Taylor said.

“Not surprisingly, they religiously follow the teachings of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*.”

“These guys sound like ninjas,” Ostin said.

Gervaso nodded. “Precisely. They are very much a modern-day version of the ninjas. They have all taken oaths to die for the Lung Li and the Elgen cause. When they take the oath they are branded with the Lung Li symbol, the fiery dragon head.”

“Branded?” Taylor said. “Like cattle?”

Gervaso nodded. “With a red-hot poker. It’s a sign of bravery.”

“Or insanity,” Tessa said.

I groaned. “Great. We’re fighting high-tech ninjas who like pain.”

“Hopefully you’ll never see them,” Gervaso said.

“Isn’t that the point of ninjas?” Ostin said. “You’re not *supposed* to see them.”

“Let me get this straight,” Tessa said. “The *eight* of us are taking on a Starxource plant with extra Elgen guards, the entire Taiwanese army, and a powerful group of ninjas?”

Gervaso nodded. “Yes, but it could get worse.”

“How could it possibly get worse?” Zeus asked.

“There’s a chance that Hatch may be sending his Glows to protect the girl. We will know within a few days.”

“We’re so dead,” Tessa said.

No one else said anything.

* * *

That afternoon Gervaso and I practiced my magnetic-bullet thing again. This time it was my idea. After our morning meeting I felt even more motivated to prepare. Fear is a great motivator.

I experimented with focusing my pulse in different ways to see if I could increase the effect. It worked. Once I knocked a bullet out of range by more than eight feet.

“I can deflect bullets,” I said.

“Not just bullets,” Gervaso said. “If you can deflect something as small and fast as a bullet, you could deflect knives, axes, even Chinese stars.”

“Like in the movies,” I said.

“Yes. Just like in the movies,” he replied.

I just hoped our movie had a happy ending.



PART TWO



**The ES *Faraday* Boardroom
Port of Callao Harbor, Peru**

The Elgen board stood at attention as Hatch walked into the room. He sank into his throne-like leather chair, pausing a moment before saying, “You may be seated.” He silently looked around the table, his gaze resting momentarily on each member of the board. Then he took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. “I will be leaving for Switzerland in the morning. Our bankers are not cooperating with my demands, so I, along with Tara and Torstyn, will be paying them a visit. It’s possible that Schema might be involved.”

Hatch had sent out a memo to all Elgen that the former chairman was a traitor and criminal and should he still be alive, the reward for his capture was a million dollars.

“But, sir, wasn’t Schema killed on the *Ampere*?” asked Six.

“So we hoped. But some recovered video footage has led us to believe that he and the other traitors escaped the *Ampere* before it was destroyed. If so, I’m certain he would seek out our bankers, which is all the more reason to pay them a visit.” Hatch paused again, then added, “But that isn’t why I convened this meeting.”

Hatch stood, his expression growing impassioned. “We are entering a new age, Elgen. A golden age. A *renaissance*. We are on the cusp of fulfilling our vision. We are close to solving the problem with the MEI technology.

“This breakthrough came from a place we did not expect. A young Chinese girl named Jade Dragon is the first to fully understand the science behind the MEI since the brilliant scientist Dr. Coonradt. She will teach our scientists how to use the MEI to populate the world with a new species.”

“But, sir,” Seven said, “our scientists have been successfully using the MEI for years, electrifying rats.”

“*Rats*,” Hatch said, shaking his head. “*Using* the MEI is simple. It’s like a child playing a video game. He may know how to turn the machine on and even win the game, but he has no idea how the machine actually works. Until this girl came along, no one, including our scientists, has understood the actual dynamics of how the MEI alters human DNA. This child has figured it out without even knowing the MEI existed. It’s only a matter of time before we have the information we need from her to make the necessary alterations to the MEI that will allow us to create electric children”—he paused—“instead of just dead ones.”

Hatch looked around the room. “Are there any questions?”

Seven raised his hand. “After we solve the problems with the MEI, will we continue building Starxource plants?”

“Of course,” Hatch replied. “Populating the world with a new species will take more than a century. In the meantime, there are already seven billion Nonels on this planet. It is time we brought those numbers down to a manageable number.”

“What’s a manageable number?” Six asked.

“A billion or so.”

“Will the Nonels ever become completely extinct?” Seven asked.

“I’ve not yet decided, but probably not. Just as the horse has survived the automobile, there will always be a use for beasts of burden.”

“Do you mean slave labor?” Seven asked.

“You make that sound like a bad thing,” Hatch said with a dark smile. The rest of the board members laughed.

“In spite of our setback in Peru, things are moving forward at a tremendous pace. The world’s hunger for energy has driven the Nonels to our door in increasing numbers. Dr. Benson will now give us our production report.”

A woman sitting to the side of the table wearing a white lab coat stood. “Good afternoon. I’m pleased to report that the Chad, Greece, and Portugal plants will be fully operational by the end of next month. That will bring us to twenty-nine operating plants—though, after the recent terrorist attack, the Peruvian plant will not be fully operational for another eight months.

“We are currently generating 776 million kilowatt hours each year and providing power to 194 million people, or 3.6 percent of the world’s energy. After we complete our Southern India, Pakistan, and Philippines plants we will be generating 2.8 billion kilowatt hours per year, providing power for about 11 percent of the world’s population, and 13 percent of the electricity currently being generated in the world. We are slightly ahead of schedule to reach our twenty-four-month goal of providing power to 19.89 percent of the world’s countries, comprising 46 percent of the global population.”

Hatch smiled with satisfaction. “I should add that currently, more than a billion and a half people in the world have no access to electricity. We will remedy this in three years. We will be their saviors.”

“Admiral, what if the oil producers pressure governments to stop us?” Six asked.

“Do you think I’m not prepared?” Hatch asked, his tone revealing his annoyance with the question.

Six wilted. “No, sir.”

“I was prepared long before they considered us a threat. This is global fencing. *Pave* and *repave*. Should Japan declare war on us, the Taiwanese and Filipinos will declare war on them. How could they not? We are providing eighty-six percent of Taiwan’s electricity and seventy-two percent of the Philippines’ energy. To lose our electricity would create anarchy at home. They can have wars in their own streets or war abroad; it’s an easy choice.”

“Sir, you said that we will reduce the Earth’s population. How?” Eleven asked.

“Efficiently, of course,” Hatch said. “Our efforts will be of biblical proportions.”

“Biblical?” Seven asked.

“Yes,” Hatch said. “Biblical. We are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse prophesized to bring about the end of man’s history. It was written thousands of years ago that ‘They,’ meaning us, ‘were given power over the Earth to kill by sword, famine, plague, and the wild beasts.’

“Of course we will not dirty our hands by bearing swords. We will provide money and arms to those countries who follow us; then we shall lead them into conflict. We’ll start with the small countries and, like the wars in Korea and Vietnam, these conflicts will draw bigger countries in behind them until we have World War Three. Hundreds of millions will die.

“But war is only the first horseman; next comes famine. War has always produced scarcity, but we shall add to it. We will shut down power to those producing food and to those who distribute it. There will be food riots and starvation and the human population will decrease still more.

“Then comes the third horseman—plagues. Our laboratories will release the plagues we have created—viruses that do not affect our electric species. Our GPs will be our carriers. We will infect them, then let them out into the world, and they will spread their diseases in public places. The death toll will dwarf the black plague of the fourteenth century.

“Then, when all is in commotion, and we have created a race of our superior electrical beings in sufficient number, we will unleash the wild beasts, our electric rats, to destroy and feast on what is left of the humans.

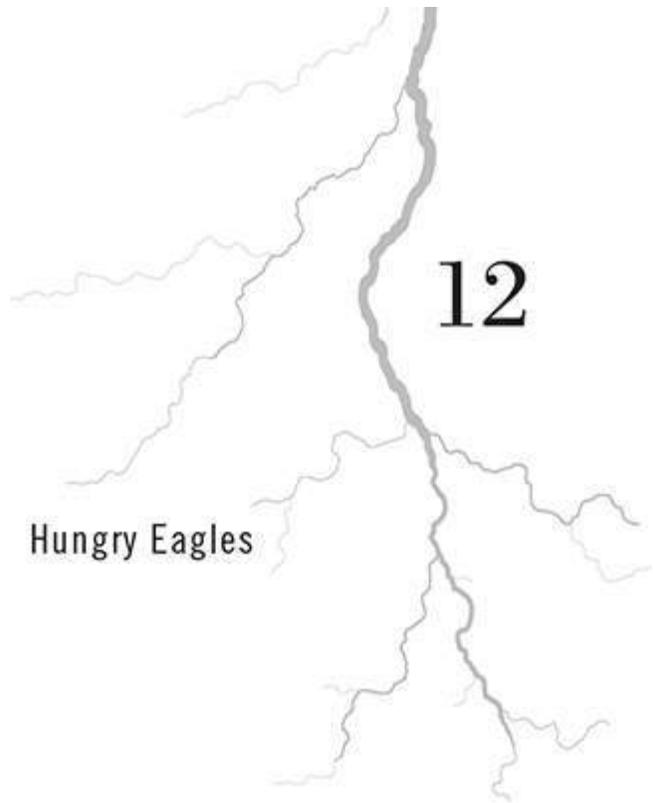
“Our scientists have just perfected the ER46, a strain of electric rat that will breed quickly and spread throughout cities, but that has been genetically disposed to survive for just three generations and then reproduce no more. The plague of beasts will last six years. The only thing that will be left in their wake will be the cities the Nonels have built, still intact.” Hatch looked around the table. “Any other questions?”

Seven began clapping, soon followed by the others.

“Very well,” Hatch said. “I’m off to Switzerland, then Taiwan. This meeting is adjourned.”



PART THREE



Beverly Hills Mall
Beverly Grove, Los Angeles, California

“Dude, we’ve got to go,” Quentin shouted at Bryan, loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the video arcade.

“Just a minute,” Bryan said. His eyes were glued to his game, as Quentin and Torstyn watched from behind. “I’m not done yet.”

“Yes, you are,” Quentin said. He raised his hand and the video game popped loudly and its screen went black.

“Dude, I was up to level eighteen! Turn it back on.”

“Yeah, right.” Quentin said. “I fried the circuitry. No one’s ever turning that game back on.”

“Thanks a lot,” Bryan said, standing.

“It’s time to go,” Torstyn said. “We’re meeting the girls for dinner at the food court before Tara and I have to leave.”

Torstyn and Tara were scheduled to fly out from Beverly Hills to Switzerland at midnight, while Quentin, Kylee, and Bryan would fly directly to Taiwan the next morning, which was why they had decided to make one last trip to the mall.

“You didn’t have to destroy the game,” Bryan grumbled.

“You like that?” Quentin said as they walked out of the arcade. “Watch this.” He raised his hand and pulsed. The entire arcade went dark. There was a moment of stunned silence; then everyone started shouting. Quentin grinned. “Do you have any idea how much it will cost them to fix that mess?”

Tara and Kylee were already in the food court when the boys arrived. They were leaning against a wall near the entrance, comparing their clothing purchases.

“Hey, beautifuls,” Quentin said to the girls.

“It’s about time you guys got here,” Tara said. “We’re starving.”

“We had to drag Bryan away from Grand Theft Auto. Where do you want to eat? They’ve got sushi, Chinese, Mexican, Italian ...”

“I’m getting Chinese,” Bryan said. “I gotta have tofu.”

“You’ve got tofu for brains,” Torstyn said. “You’re going to be eating nothing but Chinese food for the next month.”

“I’m getting a calzone,” Quentin said.

“Sounds good to me,” Torstyn said.

“And me,” Kylee said.

“Make that four,” Tara said.

“I’m still getting Chinese,” Bryan said, walking off alone.

“Suey yourself,” Torstyn said.

Quentin led the rest of them over to DiSera’s, an Italian café squeezed in between a corn dog restaurant and a sandwich shop.

“Do you know what ‘calzone’ means in Italian?” Quentin asked.

“Let me guess,” Tara said. “Folded pizza?”

Quentin shook his head. “It means *socks*.”

Tara grimaced. “You mean like the kind you wear on your feet?”

“*Esatto*,” he replied.

“Makes you want the capellini instead,” Kylee said.

“Capellini means hair,” Quentin said.

“Now I’m totally grossed out,” Tara said. “The Italians don’t know how to name food.”

“But they know how to make it,” Quentin said.

Quentin ordered four calzones, two capellini with sage and pine nuts, and six garlic breads topped with mozzarella cheese. After they’d gotten their food they walked out to the courtyard.

“There’s no place to sit,” Tara said. “This place is a zoo.”

“No,” Quentin said. “It’s a chicken pen. And these chickens are too stupid to know they should scatter when hungry Eagles arrive.”

“I can take care of the chickens,” Torstyn said. “Where do you want to sit?”

“Ladies?” Quentin said.

“How about that table right there?” Tara said, pointing to a rectangular table crowded with diners.

“You got it,” Torstyn said. He reached out toward the table. Suddenly everyone jumped up screaming and clutching their backsides. Nearly half the people in the food court turned to look at them.

Two of the people tried sitting back down, but after Torstyn burned them again they grabbed their trays and left.

“Leaving so soon?” Torstyn said as he sat down at the now-abandoned table.

Quentin sat at the head of the table, with Torstyn on one side and Tara on the other. It had taken a while for Torstyn to accept Quentin’s leadership of the group but now that he had, he had done so completely, assigning himself the role of enforcer.

“It’s good to get back to Beverly Hills,” Kylee said, sipping her Coke. “It feels like it’s been years since I’ve been shopping.”

“It’s been a week,” Quentin said. “If that.”

“I mean *real* shopping,” she said.

“As opposed to *fake* shopping?” Torstyn said.

“Don’t mind them,” Tara said. “I know what you mean.”

“Enjoy it,” Quentin said. “You’re not going to get any shopping done in Taiwan.”

“They have malls,” Tara said. “I checked.”

“You won’t have time to shop,” Quentin said. “We’ve got a job to do.”

Kylee frowned. “I don’t even know where Taiwan is.”

“It’s an island a hundred miles off the southeast coast of China,” Quentin said.

“Why are we going there?”

“To guard a girl the Lung Li brought to the Starxource compound,” Quentin said. “Didn’t you hear anything Dr. Hatch said on the call last night?”

“I was thinking about something else.”

“You were doing your nails,” Torstyn said.

Kylee glared at him. “You have a problem with that?”

Torstyn speared his pasta. “Apparently you do. You can’t paint your nails and think at the same time?”

“Chill,” Quentin said.

“I don’t understand what’s so special about this girl,” Tara said.

“She’s a savant,” Quentin said.

“What’s that?”

“It means she’s smart. Like genius smart.”

Tara’s brow fell. “And why does this concern us?”

Quentin glanced around, then said in a softer tone, “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but if you can keep it to yourself, I will.”

“I can,” Tara said. “Kylee?”

She looked up from her cell phone. “What?”

“She won’t understand what you say anyway,” Torstyn said.

“You’re such a jerk,” Kylee said.

Torstyn smiled. “Only to you.”

“All right,” Quentin said. “The Elgen scientists think this girl can show them how to make the MEI mass-produce Glows.”

Tara frowned. “So what you’re saying is that with her help, they’re going to make a lot more of us.”

Quentin nodded. “Exactly.”

“And why is this a good thing? If there’s a million of us, suddenly we’re not special anymore.”

“Yeah,” Kylee said. “What if some of them have powers better than ours?”

“We’re the pioneers,” Quentin said. “We’ll be their leaders. It’s like when the Wright brothers invented the airplane. Within five years there were dozens of plane manufacturers, but the Wrights dominated aviation because they got there first. We’re the firstborn. We’ll be the leaders of the next generation.”

“How do you know so much?” Tara asked.

“I’m smart,” Quentin said.

Tara nodded in agreement.

“We won’t be their leaders,” Kylee said. “Dr. Hatch will.”

“With *us*,” Quentin said.

“So what if something happens to Dr. Hatch?” Kylee said.

“If something happens to him, we take over the Elgen,” Quentin said.

“You mean *you* take over the Elgen,” Kylee said.

“Do you really think one person can handle all of it?” Quentin said.

“We’ll split up the world. Torstyn will take Asia, Tara gets North and South America, Bryan takes Europe, and Kylee, you get Africa, Australia, and Antarctica.”

“What do you take?” Tara asked.

“I’ll oversee all of it.”

Just then Bryan walked up to the table with a tray of orange chicken and fried rice with chunks of tofu. “How did you guys find a table in here?”

“They gave it to us,” Torstyn said.

“Why does Bryan get Europe?” Kylee asked. “That’s where the best shopping is. And why would I want Antarctica? It’s just ice.”

“Then give it to Bryan.”

“Give what to me?” Bryan asked, sitting down.

“Antarctica,” Quentin said. “When we take over the world you get Europe and Antarctica.”

“I’ll take Antarctica,” he said. “They’ve got penguins. And ice fishing. I can cut through the ice without a saw.”

“Good for you,” Kylee said. “I still want Europe.”

Tara asked Quentin, “Have you ever been to Taiwan?”

“Dr. Hatch took me there once when I was nine. I don’t remember much about it, except there was something going on in the street outside the hotel. Dr. Hatch told me it was a Chinese opera, but it sounded more like an execution.”

“Who are we guarding the girl from?” Tara asked.

“Vey and your sister,” he said. “And the rest of the traitors.”

“The next time I see Vey,” Torstyn said, “I’m going to melt his brain into a little puddle that drains out his ears.”

“That would make a very little puddle,” Bryan said. “That guy’s an idiot.”

“If he’s such an idiot, how does he keep outsmarting us?” Tara said.

“You suddenly a fan of his?” Torstyn asked.

“She’s right,” Quentin said. “The first rule of success is to never underestimate your enemy. Vey’s no idiot.” He shook his head, adding, “I hate that twitching little dork.”

“Speaking of dorks,” Kylee said, “want to see something funny? Watch that fat guy over there.”

Everyone turned to see a smiling, overweight man on the other side of the courtyard walking toward a table in the middle of the most crowded section of the food court. He was dressed in a light beige suit and tie.

“The one with the tray?” Tara asked.

“The one who looks like he ate a tray,” Torstyn said.

“He looks like he ate a stack of trays,” Tara said. “What about him?”

Kylee grinned. “Just watch.”

The man set his tray on the table, then pulled out a chair to sit. As he began sitting, Kylee reached out. “Wait for it, wait for it, now!” She magnetized, pulling the chair out from under the man. He fell back onto the ground, hitting his head on the chair and pulling the tray on top of himself.

The teens laughed. The man slowly sat up with Coke and spaghetti dripping from his face and chest. He was rubbing his head and looking around to see who had pulled out his chair.

“You did him a favor,” Torstyn said. “You helped him start his diet.”

“I can do one better than that,” Tara said. “I’ve learned a new trick.” She held up her hand, her palm facing the man, who was now standing back up, his face bright red with embarrassment.

Suddenly several women standing next to the man screamed. One fainted. Almost everyone around him ran except a few who held chairs up, as if warding him off. Then people began pelting him with trays and food. The confused man ran from the courtyard. The teens laughed again.

“That was awesome,” Bryan said. “What did you do?”

“I made everyone around him think he’s the thing they fear most.”

“That’s epic cool,” Bryan said. “You’re going to give him an inferiority complex.”

“He’s a human,” Quentin said stoically. “He *is* inferior.”

“I know, right?” Tara said.

Quentin looked at her. “So how did you do that?”

“It’s a trick I’ve been working on with Dr. Hatch and the trainers. They say that fear is located in the amygdala region of the brain, but triggered by

the hippocampus, so they taught me how to focus on it and trigger it. I can also make people think they're looking at anything or anyone."

"What do you mean?"

"Watch." Suddenly Tara turned into Dr. Hatch.

"Whoa," Torstyn said, sliding back.

"That's incredible," Quentin said. "How did you change?"

Tara turned back to herself. "I didn't. I just rerouted the part of your brains that recognizes images and made you see something else. I can prove it. You all saw Dr. Hatch, right?"

"Yes," Quentin said.

"What was he wearing?" She looked around at each of them. "What did you see?"

"A gray suit," Quentin said. "Red tie."

"No, it was a dark blue Armani," Kylee said. "I would know, I love Armani."

"He wasn't wearing a suit," Torstyn said. "And I don't think the tie was red. I think it was gold."

"I don't remember," Bryan said. "It could have been blue. Or black."

"So who was right?" Quentin asked.

"You were *all* right," Tara said. "Because the image came from your own minds. You saw what you expected to see."

"Fascinating," Quentin said. "So what did those people around the fat guy see?"

"That's the weird part. I don't know. It could have been a bear, a werewolf, a snake, a giant spider; it could have been their boss. Whatever they fear most. But I could have made him someone they like too. Like a famous movie star or singer."

"So you could make them think I'm the president of the United States?" Quentin asked.

Tara nodded. "I could make people think you look like anyone."

"That's very cool," Quentin said. "We'll have to play around with that."

Just then a large, muscular kid with bright red hair walked past their table. He smiled at Tara. "Hey, baby."

Tara rolled her eyes. "Did you really just call me baby, loser?"

He stopped next to her. "You have a problem with that?"

"Uh, yes, moron," she said.

"You think you're something special?"

“Please go away,” she said.

He glared at her, then said, “Woof.”

Tara’s eyes flashed with anger. “What did you say?”

“I said ‘woof,’ dog face.” He turned and began to walk away.

Tara turned red.

“I got this,” Torstyn said. He shouted after the kid, “Hey, ginger, did anyone else survive the accident?”

The guy turned back. “Huh?”

“Dude, is that really your head or did your neck just throw up?”

The guy flushed. “What did you say?”

“You’re ugly *and* deaf? I’ll use small words so you can read my lips. Beg my friend’s forgiveness; then I might let you run away.”

The kid’s fist clenched. “I’m going to rip your head off.”

Torstyn smiled and calmly leaned back in his chair, his arms behind his head. “Show me.”

The redhead took one step toward Torstyn, then froze. His mouth fell open and he grabbed his head, which was turning bright red. Then the blood vessels in his eyes began bursting. “Ah, ah, ah.”

“Aren’t you going to ‘rip my head off,’ tough guy?” Torstyn mocked.

“Ahhhh.”

“What are you saying? Do you want me to stop?”

“Ahhhhhhh.”

“I can’t understand you, carrottop,” Torstyn said. “I don’t speak moron.”

“That’s enough,” Tara said.

“Not for me.”

The guy fell to his knees.

“You want to worship me now, huh? You better start praying.”

“Stop it,” Quentin said. “You’re drawing too much attention.”

Torstyn looked at him. “C’mon.”

“I said *now*,” Quentin said.

Torstyn pushed one more time, then lowered his hand. “Whatever.”

The kid fell to his side, convulsing.

“What did you do to him?” Bryan asked.

“Dude was a hothead, so I added a little more heat.”

“You heated his brain?”

“It was a little hard to find, but yes.” Torstyn smiled darkly. “Not all of it. Just parts.”

Kylee grimaced as the kid vomited. “Gross.”

“Is it permanent?” Bryan asked.

“Maybe. He might have had an aneurysm. Dr. Hatch used to have me practice on GPs, but I melted too many of them, so then I started practicing on monkeys.” He grinned. “One day I fried about a hundred of them in the Lima zoo. Scientists are still scratching their heads over that one.”

“That was you?” Quentin said. “I read about it online. They’re calling it the Capuchin Virus.”

“That was me, bro. The virus.”

Bryan laughed. “That’s epic, man. That reminds me of that time at the X Games when Zeus shocked that …” He froze, realizing his slip. Everyone looked at him.

“Did you just say the Z word?” Quentin said.

Bryan swallowed. “Sorry, man. It was an accident.”

“You think?” Kylee said.

“You’re lucky Dr. Hatch wasn’t around,” Tara said. “You’d be on lockdown for a week.”

“Like I was in Peru,” Kylee said. “He needs to be punished.”

Bryan looked afraid. “Please don’t tell him. Please.”

Quentin looked at the others. “I’ll let you off this time. But don’t do it again.”

“Oh, come on,” Kylee said. “No one let me off.”

“That’s because you were dumb enough to say it in front of Dr. Hatch,” Torstyn said.

“Thanks, man,” Bryan said. “Stupid mistake.”

Quentin squinted. “You owe me a big favor. Don’t forget.”

“You got it. Thanks.”

Just then an Asian woman knelt down next to the kid on the ground. “I’m a doctor,” she said. She looked at Torstyn. “Did you see what happened?”

“Dude dropped to the ground like a fish,” Quentin said.

“Will one of you call 911?”

“We’re eating,” Torstyn said, turning away.

The woman stared at him in disbelief. “He may be dying.”

“Everyone goes sometime,” Torstyn said.

The woman just gaped. Someone at a nearby table said, “I’ll call.”

As a large crowd started to gather, Quentin said, “We better get out of here. We’ve only got two more hours before we need to get back.”

As they stood Kylee asked, “Will you bring us back some chocolate from Switzerland?”

“Of course,” Tara said.

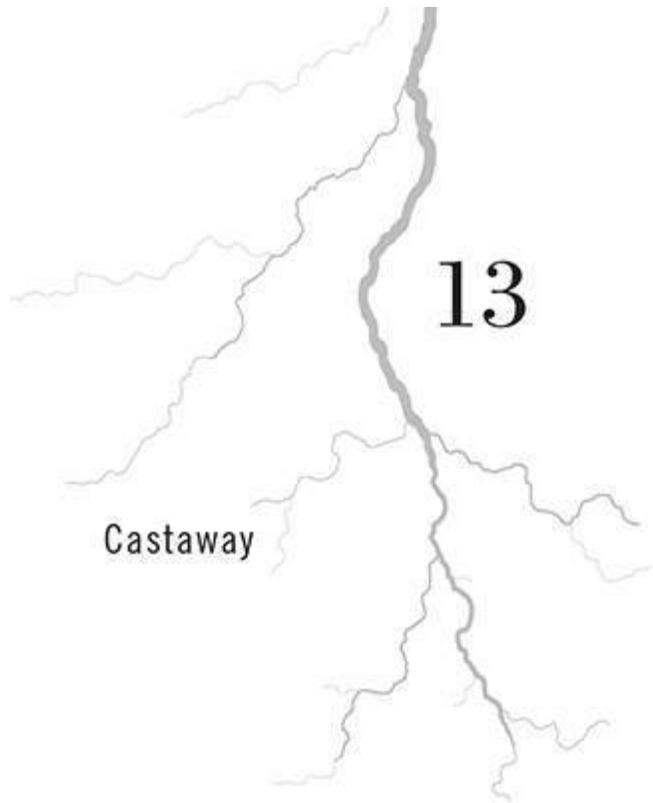
“Better get a lot,” Quentin said. “There won’t be any decent chocolate in Taiwan.”

“I’ll buy twenty pounds of it,” Tara said.

The five of them walked away. As they left the food court Quentin raised his hand and shut the place down.



PART FOUR



Port of Lima, Peru

Schema and the surviving Elgen board members were about a mile up the Peruvian coast from the *Ampere* when the *Watt* exploded. They briefly slowed their raft and watched as a column of thick, black smoke billowed up into the twilight sky.

“It’s the *Ampere*,” Three said.

Schema turned back. “*Andiamo*, we must keep going. Once they recover from the attack, the whole Elgen guard and the Peruvian military will be looking to find who did that.”

Ten minutes later there was a second explosion. “What was that?” Eight asked. “They got a second boat?”

“Hopefully they’ll take out the entire fleet,” Nine said.

“Maybe the first explosion wasn’t the *Ampere*,” Eight said.

“If it wasn’t, Hatch may have gotten out,” Schema said. He pointed toward the beach. “There. Cut back on power and head to shore.”

“Yes, sir,” Four said.

Schema carefully surveyed the beach but saw nothing but sand and a wall of foliage separating the beach from the city. They had to be careful. There were hundreds of Elgen guards around Lima, and six well-dressed foreigners coming ashore in a raft would not go unnoticed. The raft struck sand and the board members quickly climbed out.

“Send the raft back out,” Schema said to Four. “If they find it they might figure out we survived.” Schema hoped that anyone who knew they had escaped was killed in the explosion of the *Ampere*, but he couldn’t be sure, and a wrong assumption could cost them their lives.

The other board members turned the raft around; then Four started the engine again and sent it, unmanned, back out to sea. The group took cover in a small grove of palm trees while Schema walked to the road alone. After sunrise he flagged down a passing cattle truck.

Schema spoke even better Spanish than he did English, and he bargained with the driver for a ride into downtown Lima, offering the man the only valuable he still carried—his twenty-thousand-dollar Rolex watch.

Schema, who was accustomed to elegant yachts and luxury cars, now sat on the alfalfa- and manure-covered floor of the cattle truck for the twenty-minute ride. But the discomfort and humiliation were not the source of his greatest pain. His love, Two, had died after Hatch had hung her upside down in the *Ampere*’s brig, taking Schema’s place in death.

The truck reached downtown Lima a half hour later and Schema ordered the driver to stop a half block from the Hilton Hotel. “Wait here,” Schema said to the driver and the other board members. “I’ll be back.”

He brushed himself off, then walked into the hotel and up to the concierge desk. A Peruvian man wearing thick-rimmed glasses and a black suit looked up. “May I help you?”

“Yes,” Schema said. “What is your name, please?”

“I am Victor Perez.”

“Mr. Perez, my name is Giacomo Schema. I am the CEO of the Elgen Corporation. I have no identification, but if you need confirmation you can verify my identity on the Internet. My associates and I have been the victims of a crime. We were kidnapped on our way into town. The thieves stole everything and I need your assistance. If I could have access to a telephone, I can wire money to your hotel and book a room. I would like your presidential suite or an equivalent.”

Even though Schema's suit was disheveled, Perez recognized it as a twenty-thousand-dollar Ermenegildo Zegna.

"You are of what citizenship?" Perez asked.

"Italian."

"Shall I alert the Italian consulate?"

"Yes, of course," Schema said, not meaning it. "But if you please, I will do so later. I am tired and hungry and still a bit traumatized. If you can assist me, I guarantee that you will be properly rewarded." Schema took a pen from the desk and wrote his name and "Elgen Inc." Then, at the bottom of the page, he scrawled,

\$1,000 for your kind assistance

Schema looked into the man's eyes. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Being who I am, there are obvious reasons this is best handled discreetly. If you need verification, check the website."

The man googled "Elgen Inc.," and then clicked on the website's Chairman/Board tab. He looked at Schema, then back at the screen. "Yes, this appears to be you. Just one moment, sir. I must speak with the hotel manager, Señor Castillo."

He spoke into his phone and a moment later a tall Peruvian man walked up to the desk.

"Good morning, sir," he said to Schema. "I am Señor Castillo, the manager of this hotel."

Perez spoke to Castillo in Spanish, not knowing that Schema could understand him perfectly.

"This gentleman claims that he was robbed and is now without money or identification. He says his name is Giacomo Schema and he is the CEO of an international company called Elgen. I looked at the website and there is a picture of him."

"What is it he wants?"

"He wishes some assistance to transfer money. And the president's suite."

"That is correct," Schema said. "I would be most grateful for your assistance in this matter."

Castillo glanced down at the computer screen, then back up at Schema. He said in English, "I am sorry for this great tragedy. Our country is usually more hospitable, but in all big cities there are problems."

"Of course," Schema said.

"Please, follow me to my office."

Schema followed the hotel manager past the concierge desk to a small back office.

"I need to call my banker in Switzerland," Schema said. "I will, of course, take care of all expenses."

"Please," Castillo said. "You may sit at my desk."

Schema looked down at his wrist before remembering he'd given his watch away. "I forgot that my watch was stolen. What time is it?"

"It is just past nine."

"Good. It is not closing time in Switzerland yet."

"I will give you some privacy," Castillo said, stepping toward the door. "I will be right outside my office if you need me."

"Thank you," Schema said. He sat down at the desk and dialed an eleven-digit number. "Please put me through to Florian Wyss. Tell him this is Giacomo Schema."

A moment later a man answered in stilted English. "Giacomo, I have been trying to reach you. You missed our dinner party. My wife was so disappointed to not meet you."

Schema ignored the pleasantries. "Florian, I am calling with urgency. There has been a mutiny. Our director, James Hatch, has commandeered the company and the *Ampere*. He has murdered two board members and imprisoned the rest of us. It was by sheer fortune that we have managed to escape."

"*Mon dieu!*" Wyss exclaimed. "Now I understand. There was an order from President Hatch to immediately transfer eight hundred million dollars into an account in the Cayman Islands. Of course I would never make such a transfer without personally speaking with you."

"When did that order come?"

"Just a few hours ago. I have been trying to reach you."

"Then Hatch is still alive," Schema said. "This is most unfortunate. You did the right thing, Florian. I am in Lima, Peru. I need you to make arrangements to wire money to this hotel and move money to this account."

"Have you contacted the authorities?"

“The authorities of which country, Florian?”

“My apologies, Giacomo. What else do you require?”

“Send a jet for us. We will meet with you in Geneva to discuss our next move.”

“How many will be flying with you?”

“There will be six, including me.”

“Shall I freeze the Elgen accounts?”

Schema thought for a moment. “No. Hatch doesn’t know we’re still alive. Let’s let him keep his false sense of security until I have determined a course of action.”

“Where shall I wire the money?”

“I am at the Lima Hilton. Let me have you speak with the hotel manager.” Schema walked to the door. “Señor Castillo, my banker would like a word with you.”

While Castillo and Wyss worked out financial arrangements, Schema found some paper and made a list of everything he needed, including two changes of clothing. A few minutes later Castillo said, “Mr. Wyss would like to speak with you again.”

“*Gracias*,” Schema said, taking the phone.

“Everything is taken care of, Giacomo,” Wyss said. “Our bank has opened a line of credit with the hotel, so all your expenses will be covered. In the morning you will be delivered five thousand American dollars from the Banco de la Nación with a new credit card. The jet will take me a few more minutes to reserve, but it will be sent for you at the first moment possible and will reach you, at the latest, by the day after tomorrow. Señor Castillo will arrange transportation to the airport.”

“Thank you, Florian. I look forward to seeing you, and meeting your lovely wife.”

“I will be most pleased. I will see you soon. I look forward to helping you put an end to this mutiny.”

“Indeed,” Schema replied. He hung up the phone and turned to the hotel manager. “Thank you for your assistance. I will need my suite and four other rooms for my board members.” He handed Castillo the list he had made. “Also, I will need these things delivered to my room as soon as possible.”

“As you wish, sir. Is there anything else you will require?”

“Please have your finest wine, cheese, and fruit sent to my room. Also, your best steak with a cheese-and-mushroom omelet.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And one more thing. Give yourself a thousand-dollar tip. You’ve been most helpful.”

* * *

By the time Schema retrieved the other board members and got to his own suite, there was a bottle of Peruvian wine waiting for him, along with a selection of crackers and cheeses, dates, apricots, and honey, as well as a T-bone steak and an omelet.

Schema examined the bottle of wine, poured himself a glass, then took a sip. “It isn’t Château Margaux, but it will do.” He drank the glass, then wolfed down his meal. He hadn’t eaten for nearly twenty-four hours and he felt it.

When he’d finished eating, he took off his clothes and lay back on his bed. Now that the danger and hunger that had filled his mind were gone, his thoughts turned to the man who had caused him such pain. Hatch had taken everything from him—his company, his love, his future. Now that he knew Hatch was still alive, he wanted revenge. *He will pay, Schema thought. I will use every last dime, every means available to me, to make him pay for what he has done. I will destroy Hatch if it’s the last thing I do.*

The question Schema struggled to answer was: *Just how desperate is Hatch?* Schema could employ a mercenary army to overthrow Hatch and his Elgen guard, but that could take weeks or months to organize. In the meantime, Hatch had full access to all the Starxource plants. He could destroy every Starxource plant in a matter of hours. Or, worse yet, he could release the rats into the countries they inhabited, causing mass destruction. Schema had no doubt that the attacked countries would destroy everything Elgen, leaving nothing for Schema to recover.

However he proceeded he had to be careful. Underestimating Hatch was a mistake he couldn’t afford to make again.



Bank of Geneva Geneva, Switzerland

The flight from Lima to Geneva took a little more than fourteen hours. Wyss had cars waiting for them at the airport and the board was taken to the Metropole Hotel, on the bank of Lake Geneva, while Schema, in a separate car, went directly to the offices of the Bank of Geneva.

“It’s good to be back in Switzerland,” Schema said to the driver as they left the hotel.

“It is always good to be in Switzerland,” the driver replied. “Would you like me to wait for you?”

“Yes,” Schema said. “I should only be an hour or so.”

The car pulled up to the curb in front of the bank, and inside, Schema took the elevator to the seventh floor, to Wyss’s office. Wyss’s secretary, a mature Frenchwoman, greeted him as he entered.

“*Bienvenue*, Monsieur Schema. Mr. Wyss and his associates are expecting you. Please go on back.”

“*Merci*,” Schema said as he walked past her desk. He suddenly turned back. “His associates?”

“Yes, *Monsieur*.”

Schema walked past the reception area to Wyss’s office and opened the door. Florian Wyss was sitting at his desk. He looked up when Schema entered. His face was pale and his hand was wrapped in white gauze.

“Florian, what happened to your hand?”

Wyss shook his head. “I am very sorry, Giacomo. I had no choice.”

Schema walked farther into the room. “What are you talking about?”

“He gave me no choice.”

“Who?” Schema said.

“That would be me,” Hatch said. He walked into the office flanked by Torstyn and Tara and four Elgen guards. The guards immediately surrounded Schema. “And I believe Mr. Wyss is referring to the sizable transfers we just made.”

Schema turned white. “Call security,” he said to Wyss.

“Giacomo, what kind of welcome is that?” Hatch said calmly. “After traveling halfway across the world I thought you would at least offer me a drink.”

Schema glared at him, red with rage. He would have lunged at him were it not for the guards surrounding him.

“No?” Hatch said. “Then I’ll help myself.” He walked over to the credenza on the far side of the office and poured himself a drink from a crystal decanter. “Ah, the good stuff. No wonder you bank here.” He stepped back toward Schema. “Of course, I would have preferred that you had gone down with the *Ampere*, but, as it turns out, it is fortuitous that you didn’t. Otherwise I might have had some trouble locating a few of your accounts.”

Schema looked back at Florian. “What have you done?”

“I had no choice, Giacomo. All the money has been transferred.”

Schema leaned in. “Surely not ... *everything*.”

Florian grimaced. “Everything.”

“How could they have even known about those accounts?”

Florian glanced over at Tara, who smiled darkly. “They have ways of getting into your head.”

“It’s done, Giacomo,” Hatch said. “Everything is gone. Except you, of course. You’re still here. Now, I could easily remedy that and shoot you right now, but where would the fun be in that? So I propose a challenge. You are a fugitive from nearly every civilized country and now you have no money to run. Oh, and I put a million-dollar bounty on your head. Let’s see just how long you can survive. Florian, call Interpol. Inform them that a known fugitive has entered your bank.”

Wyss blotted his forehead with a handkerchief. “Please, Admiral Hatch ...”

“Wrong answer,” Hatch said. “Torstyn ...”

“Yes, sir.”

“Help Mr. Wyss understand how much I dislike being disobeyed. He still has one hand with flesh.”

“Please, no,” Florian said, lifting the phone. “I’ll call right now. I’ll alert Interpol immediately.” He pushed a button on his phone. “Connect me with security.”

Hatch turned to Schema. “It’s pathetic, isn’t it, how quickly loyalties turn? You really can’t trust anyone these days. Now, if I were you, and thankfully I’m not, I would run. And joining the others isn’t in your best interest. I’ve already sent guards to the Metropole to collect them.” Hatch grinned. “Some of the EGGs and I have a bet on how long you can resist capture.” He flourished a hand. “It’s a game of sorts.” He turned to Wyss. “If you please.”

Wyss spoke into the phone. “This is Florian Wyss of Bank of Geneva. I would like to report a known fugitive who has been seen in our bank. Yes. Immediately.” He hung up and looked at Schema. “I am very sorry.”

“You will pay, Hatch,” Schema said.

“Yes, so you’ve said,” Hatch said. “But I’m still waiting for the bill.” His dark gaze turned to amusement. “Now please hurry. If you’re captured today I’ll lose the bet. And you of all people should know”—he leaned forward and his voice dropped—“that I hate to lose.”

An alarm sounded. Schema glanced once more at Florian, then turned and ran out of the building.

Hatch laughed. “That went well.”

Wyss used his bandaged hand to blot the sweat from his forehead. “I’ve done everything you asked. You’ll release my wife and daughter now?”

Hatch looked at him quizzically. “Of course not.”

Florian blanched. “But you said that if I cooperated ...”

“Yes, I did,” Hatch said. “Allow me to explain. There is a fable about a man who comes to a riverbank and is about to cross when he sees a viper. The viper says to the man, ‘I would also like to cross the river. Would you please carry me across?’ The man replies, ‘No, you’re a viper. You’ll bite me and I’ll die.’ ‘Don’t be foolish,’ the viper says. ‘If I bite you, we’ll both drown.’”

“The man, convinced by the snake’s reasoning, puts the viper on his back and swims across the river. As he reaches the opposite bank the viper bites the man and slithers off. As the man lies dying he says, ‘I carried you across. You said you wouldn’t bite me.’ ‘Sorry,’ the viper replied. ‘I’m a viper. It’s in my nature.’”

A broad smile crossed Hatch’s face and he leaned forward. “Thanks for the lift, Florian, but I can’t really help myself. It’s in my nature.”

“What will you do with my family?”

“Your wife and daughter will be held as GPs.”

“What are GPs?”

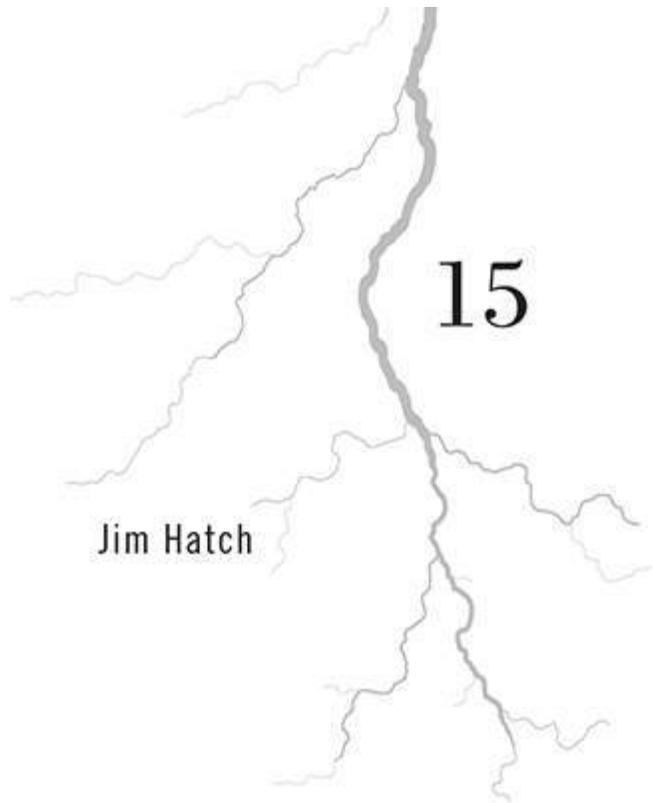
“They’ll find out soon enough. Unfortunately, you won’t. Now, if you’ll excuse me, we’re needed in Taiwan.” Hatch said to Torstyn, “We’ll be in the car. Finish him.” Hatch walked out of the office followed by Tara and his guards.

Wyss just stared at Torstyn in horror. “Please ...”

Torstyn reached out his hand. “It won’t hurt ... for long.”



PART FIVE



Timepiece Ranch

After my practice session with Gervaso I knocked on my mother's door. She answered, smiling as soon as she saw me. "I was just thinking about you."

"I need to ask you something," I said.

"Of course," she said. "Come in." As I stepped into the room she said, "This sounds serious."

"It is."

She closed the door, then looked at me, her arms folded at her chest.

"What is it?"

"Is there something going on between you and that Joel guy?"

"Something?"

"You know." I hesitated and she tilted her head. "*Romantic.*"

She thought for a moment, then said softly, "I don't know."

"What does that mean?"

“Just what I said. We’re close friends. I care about him. I don’t know where it’s going.”

I suddenly felt defensive. “You care about him? How long have you even known him?”

“I’ve known him longer than you think,” she said. “You’ve met him before, you know.”

“I have?”

“When you were four. He helped us move from Pasadena to Idaho.”

“How did you know him?”

“Anna, Joel’s sister, worked with your father at the hospital. Shortly after your father died, she disappeared. She had told Joel about the Elgen and told him that if anything happened to her he should help us hide.”

For the first time in my life I realized that all our moving around wasn’t just about me. “So you’ve known about the Elgen since I was born?”

“Of course. It was a company your father was working with. The MEI was something we thought might change the world, not the way Hatch does, but for the better. James Hatch worked with your father. In fact, we had him over for dinner.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Dr. Hatch was in our *home*?”

My mother nodded. “We called him Jim back then. He came over to the house once for a barbecue.”

I was speechless. It was like hearing my mother was in a book club with Hitler. “You barbecued with Dr. Hatch? The man who kidnapped you and tried to kill me?”

“He wasn’t trying to kill anyone back then. In fact, you weren’t even born. I was thirty-six weeks pregnant when they placed the MEI in the hospital. I gave birth to you the next week.”

“Then why didn’t you recognize him in the parking lot at PizzaMax?”

My mother smiled. “It had been almost fifteen years. He’s changed a lot since then. *And* he was wearing sunglasses.”

“This is unbelievable,” I said.

“Believe it or not, Jim Hatch was a pretty normal guy. He brought me flowers in the hospital when you were born.”

I struggled to process this. “What was he like?”

“He was a little insecure, but hardworking and very ambitious, which isn’t always a bad thing. I don’t know why he turned out the way he did. I

think he got caught up in something that took him over. The lust for power can do that.”

“He’s insane now,” I said. “And evil.”

“Maybe. But he wasn’t back then. It’s easy to place people in black-and-white categories of good or bad, but the truth is there’s a lot of both in all of us.”

“You’re nothing like Hatch,” I said. “Neither am I.”

“You’re right. There’s one big difference.”

“What’s that?”

“Love.”

“He loves himself,” I said.

My mother shook her head. “No. He feeds his hunger, but that’s not self-love, just selfishness. Deep down he must hate himself or he could never be so cruel. When people do things contrary to their own moral foundation, they either feel guilty and change or try to break down the foundation of their belief.

“Jim Hatch has tortured and killed people. Unless you’re a sociopath, the only way to do things like that and still live with yourself is to convince yourself that the end justifies the means.”

I just sat quietly thinking.

“And, Michael, you don’t have to worry about me. I’m not going to do anything foolish.” She stepped closer. “I’m glad you came over. I wanted to talk to you about something too.”

I looked up at her.

“I’m afraid.” She breathed out slowly. “Afraid and conflicted. And I don’t know what to tell you to do.” She put her hands on my shoulders. “I’m terrified of you going to Taiwan. I feel like any mother must feel sending a son off to harm’s way. If the reasons weren’t so important, I’d never let you go.” Her eyes filled with tears. “Part of me is so proud of you that I’m without words. The other part ...” She wiped her eyes. “I’m still your mother. I’m supposed to protect you.”

I bowed my head. I didn’t know what to say.

“It’s not fair that you’ve been placed in this position. You’re so young.”

“Alexander the Great was only sixteen when he ruled the world,” I said. “And Joan of Arc was only seventeen when she led the French army.”

“And she was nineteen when the English burned her at the stake.”

“Maybe not the best example.”

“One of the last things your father said to me before he died was to keep you safe. I haven’t done a very good job at that.” She looked me in the eyes. “I wonder if he would be disappointed in me.”

“Is it better to be safe and worthless, or valuable and in danger?”

“Now you sound like your father.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

She slowly shook her head. “No. It’s not. But what do *you* want?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want.”

“It always matters,” she said. “Do you want to go to Taiwan?”

“And face the Elgen? No. But I have to.”

“No, you don’t. You’ve already risked enough. Let someone else do it.”

“Who?”

She looked at me for a moment, then put her arms around me. “When did you become so strong?”

“When they took you,” I said.

“Just promise me that you’ll always come back.”

“I promise,” I said. We both knew it was a promise I couldn’t make.

After a moment she kissed my forehead and stepped back. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“There’s one thing,” I said. I hesitated. “It’s a little complicated.”

“Whatever you want,” she said.

“It’s not for me. It’s for Taylor.”

She smiled. “Just tell me what to do.”



The next morning we gathered again for class. For the first time Gervaso was late. When he arrived there was something different about him. Not the way he dressed or anything, but the way he looked at us. There was a gravity to his demeanor.

“Good morning,” he said. “Excuse me for being late. I’ve been in a meeting with the council. Operation Jade Dragon is a go.”

While this wasn’t a surprise to any of us, hearing Gervaso’s pronouncement made it real in a way it hadn’t been before.

Ostin was the first to speak. “When do we leave?”

“The day after tomorrow. That will give you time in Taiwan to prepare for the *Volta*’s arrival.” He looked around at all of us. “There’s no class today. I want you to have down time before you go. In the meantime, if I can do anything for you, just let me know.”

“Will we meet again before we leave?” Ian asked.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

As everyone walked out I approached Gervaso.

“I’d like to try the bullet thing again.”

“Of course. When would you like to go?”

“Right now,” I said. “If you have the time.”

“I have the time.”

We drove back out to the shooting range. As Gervaso loaded the gun, I stepped in front of the target so the bull’s-eye was directly behind my stomach.

Gervaso looked up from behind the gun’s scope. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t want to find out I can’t do this while they’re shooting at me.”

For the first time since I’d met him he looked truly worried. “Are you sure about this?”

“Just don’t shoot before I’m ready.”

“I’ll guarantee that. We’ll count down. Three, two, one, fire, okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

He got behind the gun again. I took a deep breath and pulsed slightly, enough that electricity started sparking between my fingers.

“Ready?” he asked.

I was ticking like crazy. “Let’s do this.”

He put his finger on the trigger. “Here we go. Three, two”—I pulsed—“one, fire.”

A single round exploded from the gun. It smashed into the cinder-block wall beside me. Gervaso stood and I could see relief on his face. He walked quickly toward me. “You did it.”

We walked over and examined where the bullet had hit. It was nearly twelve feet off the mark.

“I think you overcompensated,” he said.

“I was nervous.”

He laughed. “Nervous.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “You may be the bravest person I’ve ever met.”



We met again the next morning, but only for a few minutes. Gervaso briefed us on what he knew of the Taiwan Starxource plant, concluding with, “Your Taiwanese operative will fill you in on the rest.” Then, as he looked us over, he did something that surprised us all. He stood at attention and saluted us. Then he said, “It’s been an honor knowing all of you.”

Taylor whispered to me, “He’s acting like he’s never going to see us again.”

As we got up to leave, Gervaso stopped me. “Michael.”

“Yes, sir.”

“May I talk to you a moment?”

“Of course.” I looked at Taylor. “Where are you going?”

“I told my mother I’d go horseback riding with her,” she said.

“Let me know when you’re back,” I said.

As she walked off I turned to Gervaso. “Yes, sir.”

“I want to personally thank you for your leadership and bravery.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“I joined the military when I was just eighteen. I have served under many leaders. You are not only brave, you are also a very good leader, which is why your friends follow you into danger.” He reached into his pocket and brought out something wrapped in a white handkerchief. He peeled back the cloth to reveal a bronze medal in the shape of a cross with an eagle with outspread wings in its center. A banner beneath the eagle read,

FOR VALOR

“Have you ever seen one of these before?”

I looked back up at him. “No.”

“This is the Distinguished Service Cross. It is the United States Army’s second-highest military award. It is given for extreme gallantry in battle.”

“Is it yours?”

“It was,” he said. “I received it during Operation Desert Storm in Iraq.” Then he handed it to me. “I’m giving it to you.”

I made no move to take it. “I can’t take that.”

“It would be an insult for you to refuse.”

“It’s too much. I don’t deserve it.”

“I know what you have done, Michael. I have studied the reports. You deserve this award more than I do. Please, don’t refuse my offering.”

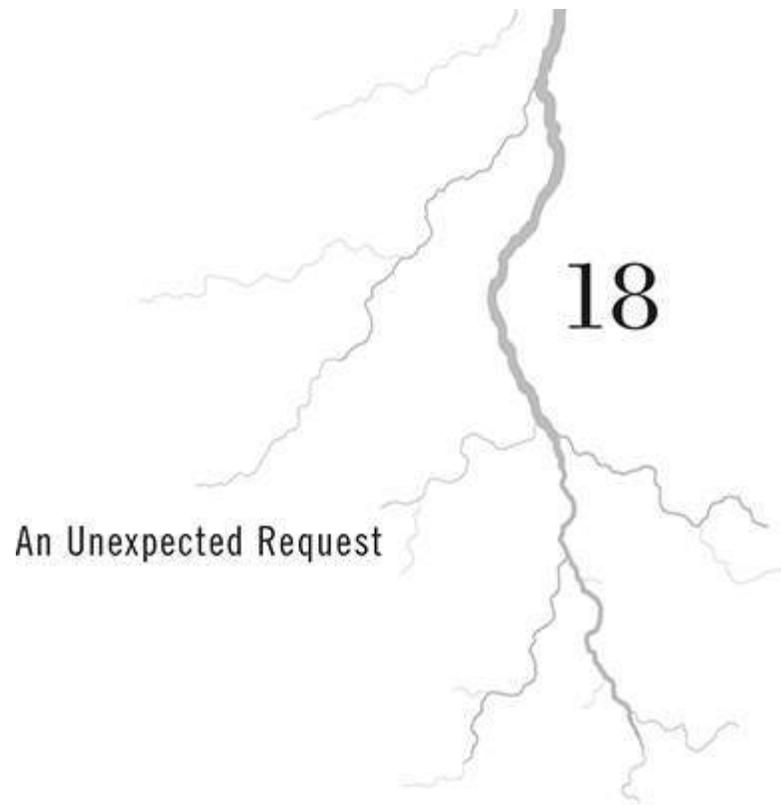
For a moment we looked into each other’s eyes. I reached out and took the medal. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Your actions have said enough.” He saluted me again. This time I saluted back.

“I want a full report when you return with Jade Dragon.”

“Yes, sir.”

He stepped forward and hugged me. “Good luck.” Then he turned and walked away. I looked back down at the medal. It was the greatest honor of my life.



“Dude,” Ostin said. “I can’t believe he gave that to you. That’s like the coolest thing ever. The only medal higher is the Medal of Honor.”

“I can’t believe it either.”

Ostin reached out his hand. “Let me see it again.”

I handed him the medal. “That’s epic.” He looked at it for a moment, then handed it back to me. “Gervaso gave me something too.” He lifted a small burgundy book from his bed. *The Art of War*. “He thought it might come in handy if we face the Lung Li.”

“Have you started reading it yet?”

“I’m not *reading* it; I’m *memorizing* it.”

“Sorry.” I put the medal in my pocket. “Have you seen my mom?”

“She was just here,” he said. “She left that for you.” He pointed to a large rectangular box on my bed. “Is that your ...”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Then you’re still doing it tonight?”

“Of course.”

He looked concerned.

“Why? Don’t you approve?”

“I mean, it’s great and all, but why tonight? We leave in the morning.”

“I’m doing it *because* we leave in the morning.”

He thought for a moment, then said, “That makes sense.”

Someone knocked on our door.

“Come in,” I said, turning around.

Joel stepped inside. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said. “Michael, could you come with me for a moment? The council would like to speak with you again.”

“Right now?”

He nodded. “Yes, please.”

I turned to Ostin. “If Taylor comes by, don’t let her see the box.”

“You got it,” he said.

I followed Joel down to the council room. He opened the door for me and followed me in. There were only eight members around the table. Simon stepped forward to greet me. “Michael, thank you for coming.”

“No problem,” I said, wondering what this was about.

“Have a seat. Please.”

I sat in the chair closest to the door.

Simon waited until I was settled, then said, “I imagine you must feel some apprehension as you prepare to go.”

“Yes, sir.”

“As do we,” he said. “The reason we wanted to talk to you is because we’ve just received a report that Hatch has assigned his electric youth to oversee the transporting of Jade Dragon to the *Volta*. That means you may be facing Quentin, Bryan, Kylee, Torstyn, and Tara.”

“I’ve faced them before,” I said.

“But this time there will also be the Elgen guards and the Lung Li. Any one of those alone is dangerous. Together, we fear it is too much. We thought you might need some help.”

“What kind of help?” I asked.

Simon looked over the table, then said, “We think you should take Nichelle with you to Taiwan.”

I thought I must not have heard him correctly. “You mean Hatch’s Nichelle? The one who tortured us?”

“Yes.”

“Are you kidding?”

The council member sitting next to Simon, who had been introduced as Thomas, spoke up. "I know this must come as a surprise. We expect that it will to the Elgen as well. You're the only one of the electric youth who has been able to stop her, so she's still a viable threat to the others. She could be a powerful asset to the Electroclan."

"Have you ever met her?" I asked.

"No," Simon said. "And certainly not the way you have."

"We can't trust her."

"We believe we can," Thomas said. "We've been following her for some time now. She's very angry at Hatch for abandoning her."

"You know what they say," the woman sitting next to Thomas said. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

Thomas nodded in agreement. "She's very bitter."

"Nichelle is *always* bitter," I said. "She's psychotic." I looked around the table. Everyone was looking at me with concern.

Thomas lifted a folder and slid it across the table to me. "This is her dossier. After the Elgen abandoned her she lived on the streets around Pasadena for about a week until she met some men we believe are former gang members. She's living with them in a West Pasadena apartment. We don't know if she's been involved in any illegal activity but she has a job at a taco stand, so we think she's at least trying to make good."

Simon said, "We assume that these men she's with are dangerous. But not nearly as dangerous as you."

I looked around the table, then said, "I need to think this over."

"It's your decision, Michael," Simon said. "You're the leader of this mission. But we are unanimously for it. For *your* sake."

I scratched the back of my head as I thought. As crazy as it sounded, they were right about one thing: battling the Elgen, the Lung Li, *and* the Glows might be too much. "I could have Taylor read her mind," I said. "See where she's at." I took a deep breath, slowly exhaling. "If I decide to do this, how would we get her?"

"You would have to pick her up on your way to Taiwan," Thomas said. "Pasadena is only three hours from here. We've had an operative keep track of her, so we have an idea of her schedule. The safest place to approach her would be at work."

"Just give me the night to think about it."

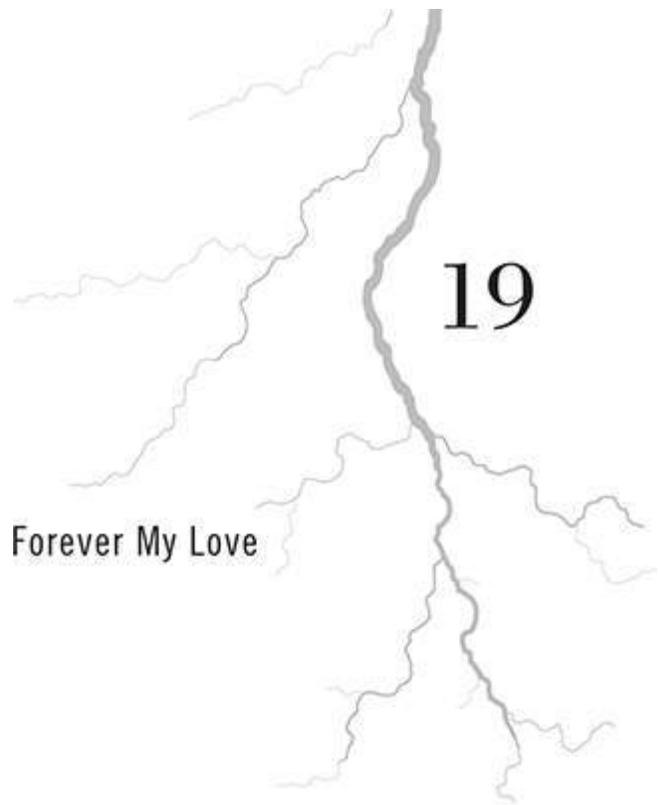
"Of course," Simon said, standing. "Again, it is *your* decision."

“Just remember that war and politics make strange bedfellows,” Thomas said.

Whatever that means, I thought. “I’ll get back to you.”

“We’ll need to inform the pilots of your decision before you leave the ranch,” Joel said, “so they can file a flight plan.”

As I walked out I thought about what Ostin liked to say: “My enemy’s enemy is my friend.” Still, it seemed impossible to imagine Nichelle working with us. Almost as impossible as talking the rest of the Electroclan into it.



When I got back to the room Ostin was packing what few things he possessed. “What did they want?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“You mean nothing you want to tell me.”

“Right,” I said.

“Great,” he said. “Now I’m going to spend the rest of the night trying to figure out what it is.”

I grinned. “Did Taylor come by?”

“Oh yeah. I gave her the box.”

“What?”

“I’m just kidding,” he said. “I told her you’d be back in a few minutes.”

“Thanks,” I said. I picked up the box, then walked over to Taylor’s room and knocked on the door.

Tessa opened. “Let me guess, you’re looking for Taylor.”

“You’re a genius,” I said.

“You can call me Ostin. No, don’t. That’s kind of creepy.” She turned around. “Taylor, it’s lover boy.”

Taylor came to the door shaking her head. She stepped outside, shutting the door behind her. "She makes me crazy."

"Tessa *is* crazy," I said. "I think it's from eating all those mashed Amazon jungle slugs."

"I just threw up in my mouth," Taylor said. She looked down at the box I was carrying. "What's that?"

"It's a present."

"For me?"

"Of course." I handed her the box. "Open it."

She tore the paper from the box, then lifted its lid. "Oh, wow." She pulled a dark grape-colored chiffon dress from the box, then handed me the box and held the dress out in front of her. "Michael."

"Sydney Lynn and my mom took care it."

"It's beautiful." She looked into my eyes. "What's it for?"

"Tonight."

Her forehead furrowed. "What's tonight?"

"That's a surprise. I'll be back at seven to get you."

Taylor tilted her head. "What are you up to, Vey?"

"I'm not telling you."

She reached out to take my hand. "You can tell me."

I stepped back. "Don't read my mind, you'll ruin the surprise."

"You're finally on to me."

"I'll be back at seven." I smiled as I walked to my room.

* * *

Later that evening Ostin and my mother watched as I put on a suit coat and tie. The coat was a little large, but under the circumstances it was the best we could come up with.

"You look so handsome," my mother said. "Here's your corsage." She handed me a white glossy box containing a cluster of white roses. Considering where we were, I didn't know how she had managed the box, let alone the flowers.

"What time is it?"

"It's almost seven."

"Is everything ready?" I asked.

My mother smiled. "Yes."

"All right," I said. "So am I."

My mother and I walked to Taylor's room. I knocked, and her mother immediately answered.

"Hi, Michael. Come on in." As she stepped back, she opened the door all the way, revealing Taylor in her new dress. It fit perfectly. It was an elegant floor-length, sleeveless dress that wrapped tightly around her middle, accenting her slim waist. For the first time in months she was wearing makeup and her hair was pulled back in an updo. She looked Photoshopped beautiful—beautiful enough to make me tic.

I stepped inside her room. "You look ... amazing."

Taylor looked at me dreamily. "And you look very handsome."

"I brought you this." I handed her the corsage.

She opened the box and took out the corsage. "Where did you get this?"

I looked at my mother and she just winked.

"I have connections," I said.

"Will you put it on?" she asked.

"I'll try." I fumbled awhile with the needle, but eventually pinned the flower to her dress without drawing blood. I took her hand. "Shall we go?"

"If you'll tell me where we're going."

"I'm taking you to the prom."

Her face was a mixed expression of surprise and gratitude. "The prom?"

"You said you wanted to go to one."

"Before you go," Mrs. Ridley said, "we need pictures."

"Mom," Taylor said.

"We are definitely taking pictures," she said. "And don't even think about rebooting me."

Between my mother and Mrs. Ridley, they took what seemed like a hundred pictures before Taylor finally said in exasperation, "Okay, we're good."

"It's just so exciting," Mrs. Ridley said.

Our mothers followed us out to the front of the Ranch House, where a horse-drawn carriage was waiting. Abigail and Jack were sitting on the front porch and Abi screamed when she saw Taylor. She ran over to us.

"Omigosh! You look so beautiful!"

Taylor beamed. "Thank you."

"No really, you look like a princess." She looked at me. "You're a lucky guy."

"I know," I said.

Jack gave me a thumbs-up.

“Your carriage awaits,” I said to Taylor.

The driver was standing to the side of the carriage wearing a cowboy hat, a Western-cut suit, and a bolo tie. He opened the door for us and I helped Taylor up.

“Have fun,” my mother said. Jack and Abigail waved to us, and Taylor’s mother began crying.

Our driver flicked the reins and the carriage started off.

When we were a little way off, Taylor asked, “Where are we going for prom?”

“Well, there isn’t a school or a restaurant within a hundred miles of here, so we had to improvise a little.”

The carriage drove us down a dirt road to a redbrick building about a mile from the compound. The driver pulled up to the front of the building, then got down and helped us out. “Have a good time,” he said.

I opened the front door of the building and Taylor stepped inside. She took just a few steps in, then stopped. “Oh, Michael.”

In the middle of the room was a small, square table set with crystal and china and lit by two long tapered candles. Strings of small lights hung from the ceiling. The floor was scattered with rose petals. There was some equipment that was too large to move, so it had been covered with sheets.

Taylor turned to me. “How did you do all this?”

“I had help,” I said. “Our moms were busy.”

I pulled a chair out from the table and Taylor sat down. Then I sat down across from her. A dark-haired man dressed in a white linen suit and vest with a baby-blue ascot walked out of a side door carrying a bottle in a bucket of ice. Following him with a bread basket was a beautiful, petite woman with short, curly dark hair and large brown eyes.

“*Monsieur, madame*, good evening,” the man said. “My name is Benoit, I am your *serveur*. And this is my assistant, Monique.”

Monique smiled and tipped her head a little. “Good evening.”

“Hi,” we said in unison.

Benoit continued, “Tonight’s meal comes all the way from Paris. We begin with a bottle of fine sparkling grape juice and warm egg-basted croissants.”

Monique set the basket of rolls on the table while Benoit uncorked the bottle and poured our glasses half full of the juice.

“We will return shortly with your hors d’oeuvre. *Bon appétite*,” he said. They left the room.

“This is so much fun,” Taylor said. “Do you know them?”

“My mom introduced me to Benoit this morning. He’s the ranch’s head chef.”

“Is he really French?”

“I think so.”

Benoit returned a few minutes later carrying a small oval plate with crackers and some salmon-colored pasty stuff I had never seen before.

“This is *pâté de foie gras*. It is a fine goose-liver *pâté*. Enjoy.” He turned and left.

Taylor just looked at me with a funny expression.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t order goose liver.”

“It’s not that,” she said, smiling. “I just can’t believe you would go to all this trouble for me.”

“You mean like, compared to breaking into the academy?”

She laughed. “I shouldn’t be surprised.”

She spread the *pâté* on a cracker and took a bite. “Mmm, this is delicious.”

“Really? You’re a lot braver than I am.”

“No,” she said. “I’m definitely not.” She held the rest of the cracker up to my mouth. “Try it.”

I opened my mouth and she fed me. “What do you think?”

“It’s good.”

“Of course it’s good. You didn’t think Benoit would lead us astray, did you?”

“I don’t really know Benoit,” I said.

She reached over and took my hand. “So I’ve been thinking. I was complaining the other day about the things I’ve missed out on, but the truth is, I have something every girl dreams of: a real-life fairy tale. The brave knight stormed into the castle and rescued the princess from a fire-breathing dragon. How many girls can say that?”

“In this scenario, Hatch is the fire-breathing dragon?”

Taylor laughed. “Yes, he’s the dragon.” She looked at me a moment more, then added, “And I’m the princess.”

“Yeah, I figured it out,” I said.

Ten minutes later Benoit returned with two bowls of French onion soup. He waited for Taylor to try it. “*C’est à votre goût?*” he asked. “Do you like it?”

“It’s delicious,” Taylor said.

“*Très bien,*” he said, again leaving us.

For our main course we had lobster and filet mignon topped with blue cheese crumbles and burgundy wine sauce. On the side we had a baked potato and wild asparagus. Monique came out a few times to check on us and fill our water glasses. As the night waned Taylor spoke less.

After Monique brought out our dessert, a crème brûlée, I said to Taylor, “You’re kind of quiet tonight.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I just have a lot on my mind. It’s too bad you can’t read my thoughts.”

“You’ll just have to tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I was just thinking about when we first met.”

I nodded. “It’s hard to believe how much things have changed.”

“I know, right? Jack was bullying you. Now he practically worships you.”

“And I practically worshipped you back then.”

She playfully cocked her head. “You’re saying that you don’t practically worship me anymore?”

“Now I *actually* worship you.”

She smiled.

“I’ve never told you this, but my first Valentine’s Day at Meridian I made a Valentine’s card for you. I was going to give it to you, but then I got scared. So when no one was looking, I shoved it in your locker.”

Her eyes lit up. “I remember that card. That was you?”

“There’s no way you remember that,” I said.

She looked into my eyes. “It said, ‘You are the most beautiful girl in the world.’”

I looked at her in surprise. “You do remember.”

“How would a girl forget that?” She shook her head slowly. “The sad thing is, I had a boyfriend at the time. But I knew it wasn’t from him because he wouldn’t do anything that nice.” She frowned. “What was wrong with me? Why would I go out with someone who didn’t treat me very well? Why wasn’t I with you?”

“Because I wasn’t cool,” I said.

Her frown grew. "That makes me feel bad."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Maybe it was because you didn't know I existed."

"I knew you existed. You were that cute boy who sat next to me."

"Who blinked a lot."

"Who blinked a lot," she said. She grinned. "I remember the first time I saw you, you winked at me. I didn't know you had Tourette's, so I just thought you were flirting."

"How do you know I wasn't?"

She leaned forward. "Because you were way too shy."

"I wasn't shy."

Her eyebrows rose in disbelief. "No?"

"No. I was just terrified."

She laughed.

* * *

After dinner Monique cleared away the table; then soft music started playing, Colby Cross's "Forever My Love."

"You know Colby's my favorite singer," Taylor said. "I got to sit in the front row at her concert when ..." She stopped. I knew why. The pain of remembering was too much. Her smile fell. "I betrayed her."

"I know," I said. "You told me about it. But it was Hatch's fault. And it certainly hasn't hurt Colby's career."

She looked at me gratefully, then took my hand. "Let's dance."

I really didn't know how to dance, but I put my arms around her and we just kind of swayed to the music. Sometime during the second song she said, "Me too."

I looked at her. "Me too what?"

"I'm sorry. Your thoughts are so strong right now, I thought you said that out loud."

"Said what?"

"I wish this would never end."

I held her tighter.

We danced for a few more songs; then Taylor started crying, gently at first, then hard. Some of her tears ran down my cheek. I looked at her.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, laying her head on my shoulder.

"What is it?"

“It’s just that, I’ve never felt this way before.”

“What way?”

“So afraid.” She looked up at me as another tear rolled down her cheek. “Tonight’s been so wonderful, but it is going to end. And tomorrow we go to Taiwan... .” For a moment she couldn’t speak. Then she said, “I’m scared. If something happens to you ...”

“Nothing will happen to us,” I said. But the second I said it, thoughts of Wade came to mind. I quickly forced the thoughts out, hoping she hadn’t heard them.

She just clung to me tighter. “No, you’re right. Nothing will happen.”

* * *

I’m not sure what time it was when we returned to the Ranch House, but it was way past midnight and I had to wake our carriage rider, who had fallen asleep on his seat. After we got back I walked Taylor to her room and we stopped outside her door. She gazed at me sweetly. “Thank you, Michael.”

“I just didn’t want you to go through life without a prom.”

“That was the best prom I could ever have.” She leaned forward and we kissed. We must have kissed for a long time because Mrs. Ridley came to the door and neither of us even noticed her until she cleared her throat.

“It’s late,” she said.

“Sorry,” I said to Taylor.

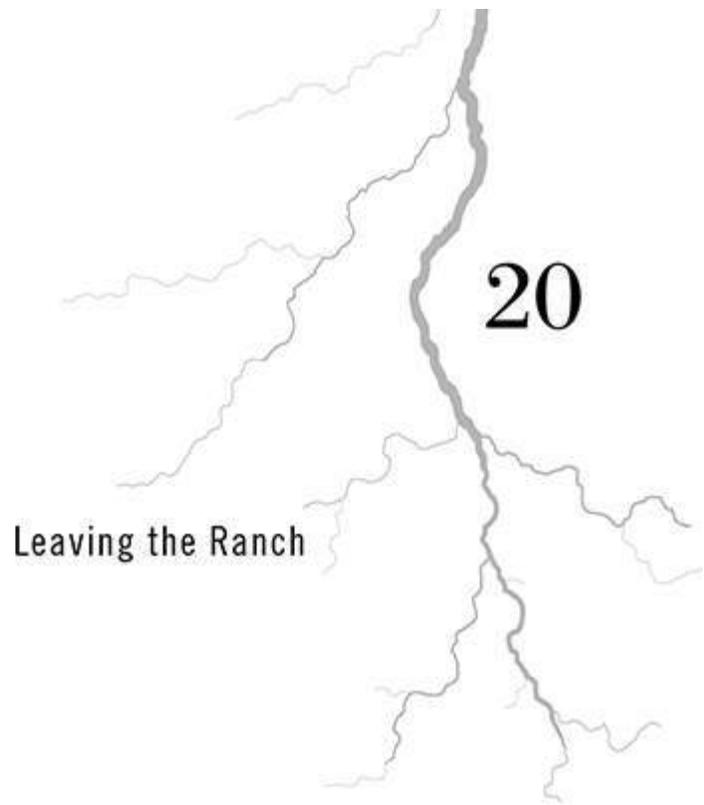
Taylor grinned. “I’m not.” She leaned forward and kissed me again.

“Good night, Michael.”

“Good night.”

Her mother looked at me and mouthed, “Thank you.”

I turned and walked down the hall to my own room, where Ostin lay fast asleep. Even as late as it was, I couldn’t sleep. For nearly an hour I just lay there thinking. I was new to this romance stuff, so maybe that’s why it was so confusing, but I couldn’t understand how tonight could simultaneously be the happiest and saddest night of my entire life.



I woke with the sun streaming in through the window. I looked over at the clock next to my bed. It was nearly six, almost time for us to leave for our flight. “Ostin?” I sat up and looked around the room, but he was gone. His bag was gone. “I can’t believe he didn’t wake me up,” I said to myself. I pulled on my pants and shirt and ran out into the hall, but there was no one around. I walked down to Taylor’s room and knocked on the door, but she didn’t answer. Then I tried to open the door. It was locked. *They must all be having breakfast*, I thought. When I got to the dining hall my heart froze. It was also empty. No Electroclan. No staff. No one. *What’s going on?*

I ran back to the Ranch House to my mother’s room and knocked on her door. “Mom!” I shouted. Nothing. I opened her door. “Mom, it’s me.” I looked inside her room. She wasn’t there. In fact the room was vacant, cleared out as if it had never been occupied. *Where is everyone?* I thought. I stepped back out into the hallway.

“Where is everyone?” I shouted. No one answered. I ran back to the main room of the Ranch House and out the front door onto the dirt drive.

The buildings and vehicles surrounding the ranch were gone. Then I turned back and the Ranch House was also gone. I looked around me. There was nothing but miles and miles of tumbleweeds and dusty, barren landscape.

And then I woke from the nightmare.

* * *

The next morning came too early. *Way* too early. I reached over to hit the snooze button and I must have pulsed because the radio-alarm clock practically exploded. Ostin laughed.

“Dude, you fried it.”

I groaned. “Someone had to.”

“Time to get up, lover boy,” he said.

I sat up and wiped the sleep from my eyes, then walked to the bathroom and showered. Ostin was already gone when I got out. I dressed, then went to the dining room for breakfast. My mother was waiting for me. Her eyes were red and I could tell that she had been crying, even though she tried to hide it. She smiled when she saw me. “How was last night?”

“It was perfect. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure.”

A few minutes later Taylor walked in with her mother. They both looked tired and their eyes were red and puffy from crying, but she smiled when she saw me. She walked up to me and we hugged.

My mother said to her, “Michael said you two had a good time last night.”

“Thank you so much,” Taylor said. “It was one of the best nights of my life.”

“I’m so glad,” she said with a sigh. “Now we’d better get some food in you two. We only have an hour before you leave.”

We all walked over to the buffet tables. “I asked the cooks to prepare something special,” my mom said. “Waffles.”

I piled a plate high with waffles, along with strawberry jam and whipped cream. Ostin was sitting with his parents. His stack of waffles was like six inches high.

As we ate, my mother got more emotional. She kept dabbing at her eyes with her napkin.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I hate good-byes.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I said.

“You be safe,” she said sternly. “You promised.”

* * *

We had just finished eating when Joel walked into the room. “Electroclan, you have twenty minutes before your bus leaves.”

“I’d better get my stuff,” I said to my mother.

“I’ll meet you out front,” she replied.

I went back to my room and grabbed the bag with the clothes they had given me and carried it out to the front of the Ranch House. The van was idling in the center of the driveway where it had let us off five days earlier. Taylor, Mrs. Ridley, and my mother were standing next to it.

Understandably, Mrs. Ridley was a mess. Ian, Tanner, and Zeus were standing next to them, and they all looked over as I walked out.

“Hey, dude,” Tanner said.

“You changed your mind and you’re coming with us,” I said.

“In your dreams,” he replied. We hugged. “You be careful.”

“*Careful* is my middle name,” I said.

“I thought *Danger* was your middle name.”

“Not this time,” I said.

Jack and Abigail walked out of the house holding hands. Abigail was crying, and Jack kept pulling her into him. They walked up to me.

“You guys come back safe,” Abigail said. She hugged me. “Bring everyone back. Promise me.”

“We’ll be back,” I said. “I promise.”

Abigail whispered into my ear. “Don’t let Jack do anything stupid, okay?”

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

She kissed my cheek. “I love you, Michael.” She smiled at me again; then, holding Jack’s hand, she went to say good-bye to Ian and McKenna.

I walked over to Taylor and our mothers. Mrs. Ridley seemed inconsolable and Taylor looked agonized by her mother’s pain. My mother put her arm around me. “This is hard,” she said softly.

Ostin was the last out. His eyes were puffy and Mrs. Liss was dabbing at her eyes with a Kleenex. Mr. Liss had his arms around both of them.

“You be careful,” Mrs. Liss said when she was close to me. “No shenanigans.”

I had no idea what she meant by that, but I hugged her and she turned back to Ostin, who was as emotional as I'd ever seen him.

A moment later Joel walked up to us. He glanced at my mother, then put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me away from everyone else. "I need to know what you've decided about Nichelle," he whispered.

"We'll bring her," I said.

He nodded in approval. "I think you're making the right choice."

"Take care of my mom," I said.

"I will." He looked at me seriously, then said, "Michael, no foolish risks. Rescue Jade Dragon if you can, but if you can't, we'll deal with it. I promised your mother you would come back safe."

"We'll do our best," I said.

He looked at me, then said, "I know you will." He looked around. "It's time to go." We walked back to my mother.

As we were about to board the van Gervaso walked out the front door. For a brief moment we looked at each other; then he saluted me. "*De oppresso liber,*" he said.

"Liberate the oppressed," Ostin translated.

I saluted Gervaso back. I hugged my mother again; then we walked over to Taylor and her mother. Mrs. Ridley turned to me. "Keep her safe. I beg you."

"I'll protect her," I said. "I'll bring her back."

"I love you, Mom," Taylor said. "I'll see you soon."

She wiped her eyes with a tissue. "I just got you back. I can't believe I'm letting you go."

A minute later Joel said, "I'm sorry, but it's time."

Taylor and her mother hugged and kissed again; then Taylor stepped toward me. "Good-bye, Mrs. Vey."

"I'll see you both soon," my mother said, doing her best to be strong. "And, Taylor?"

"Yes?"

"You keep my son safe too," she said.

Taylor nodded seriously. "I'll do my best."

I hugged my mother once more, then picked up my bag, and Taylor and I climbed into the van. The vehicle shook as the driver started the engine. With the exception of Taylor's and Ostin's sniffles, everyone on board was

quiet as the van pulled forward around the circular drive, then up the steep incline away from the compound.

I wondered if we would ever see this place again.



I wasn't sure when I was going to tell everyone about Nichelle. Initially, I was planning on breaking the news on the two-hour ride to the airstrip, but everyone was already so tired and emotionally drained that I decided against it. Taylor found out accidentally. About a half hour after we'd left the ranch I was lying against her in the back of the bus when she suddenly said, "You've got to be kidding."

"About what?"

She looked around to make sure that no one else could hear us; then she whispered, "We're really going to pick up Nichelle?"

I couldn't keep anything from her. "Yes."

"When were you going to tell us?"

"Why do you ask questions when you already know the answer?"

"I wouldn't do it now," she said. "Everyone's grumpy."

"I'm waiting until we're on the plane."

"They're going to freak, you know."

I took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. "I know."

* * *

It was around nine o'clock when we boarded the same plane we'd flown in on—a Gulfstream G650. The copilot stored our bags in the back of the fuselage as we climbed aboard. Taylor and I sat in the back.

After we'd taken off, Ostin, who had finally regained his composure, said to me, "Based on where I believe we are, I'm guessing our flight to Taiwan will be about fifteen hours. Am I right?"

"Probably," I said. "Except our first flight isn't to Taiwan."

"I figured that," he said. "Our first stop is probably in Hawaii or Japan to refuel. Which is it?"

"Neither," I said.

"What?"

I looked at him for a moment, then stood. "All right, everyone, I have an announcement to make."

Everyone turned back to look at me.

"Before we go to Taiwan we're going to make a brief stop in California. We're going back to Pasadena." No one said anything so I added, "To pick someone up."

"Who?" Zeus asked.

Taylor looked at me sympathetically.

"We're getting Nichelle."

For a moment everyone just looked at me like they were waiting for the punch line of a bad joke. Then they exploded.

"You gotta be kidding," Ian said.

"What?!" Zeus said. "What for?"

"She's coming with us."

"Tell me you're not talking about Hatch's wicked little pet, Nichelle," Tessa said.

"She's not his pet anymore," I said. "He abandoned her." The look of shock in their eyes didn't diminish. Or maybe it was pure revulsion. I was ticking badly. "Th-the council thought it would be a good idea to have her join the Electroclan," I stammered.

"Michael, I know Nichelle," Ian said, shaking his head. "Trust me, it's a bad idea."

"I've known Nichelle longer than all of you," Tessa said. "It's the worst idea I've ever heard. It's like concrete-parachute bad. The girl's creepy."

"And *mean*," McKenna added. "She's mean and she likes it."

“She’s reptilian,” Ian said. “You can’t trust a reptile.”

“They can’t make us do this,” Zeus said. “We can just say no. What are they going to do, fire us?”

“It was my decision to bring her with us,” I said.

Everyone went quiet. Zeus and Ian both folded their arms. Even Ostin’s forehead furrowed.

“Look, I know it sounds crazy. But something tells me we’ll need her. Hatch’s electric kids will be there to guard Jade Dragon. And if we have to fight them, the Elgen guard, *and* the Lung Li, having her powers will help.”

“Help who?” Zeus said. “What if she turns on us?”

“If we get her close to them she’ll just run back to them,” Ian said. “You know she will.”

“Maybe not,” Taylor said. “Hatch left her to die. Even Nichelle must understand that.”

“How will we even find her?” Zeus said. “It’s been months since we left her. She could be anywhere.”

“The resistance has been keeping track of her,” I said. “After we left her she moved in with some guys she met. She’s working at a taco stand in Pasadena. That’s where we’ll meet her today.”

“What guys?” Zeus asked. “Elgen?”

“No. I don’t know who they are. They just said they’re some gangster guys she met on the street.”

“What if she won’t come?” McKenna said.

“Then you don’t have anything to worry about—except the Elgen, the Lung Li, and Quentin, Torstyn, Tara, Bryan, and Kylee.”

“And the Taiwanese army,” Taylor added.

Everyone was quiet again. Then Ostin broke the silence. “Michael may be right. Maybe we should at least check her out.”

“I’m telling you, it’s a bad idea,” Ian said.

Zeus was still upset. “If she turns on us, I’ll fry her like bacon.”

“Unless she gets you first,” Tessa said.

“If she turns on us,” Jack said, “I’ll punch her out, then you can fry her.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

* * *

The flight to California took a little less than three hours, though it felt much longer. I think I was as anxious about picking up Nichelle as I was

about rescuing Jade Dragon. After we'd landed and disembarked, the pilot came out on the tarmac to speak with me.

"Michael, we need to fly out of here by seven o'clock, so you need to be back no later than six. We're under the jurisdiction of the air traffic controllers, so we can't bend the rules."

"We'll be here," I said. "With or without her."

"Good luck."

I looked at the others. "I'm going to need it."

I wrote down the address of the taco stand where Nichelle was working and we split up into three taxis, Jack and Zeus taking charge of the other two.

"Let me do the talking with Nichelle," I said. "If you get there before me, don't let her see you. Don't do anything until we're all together."

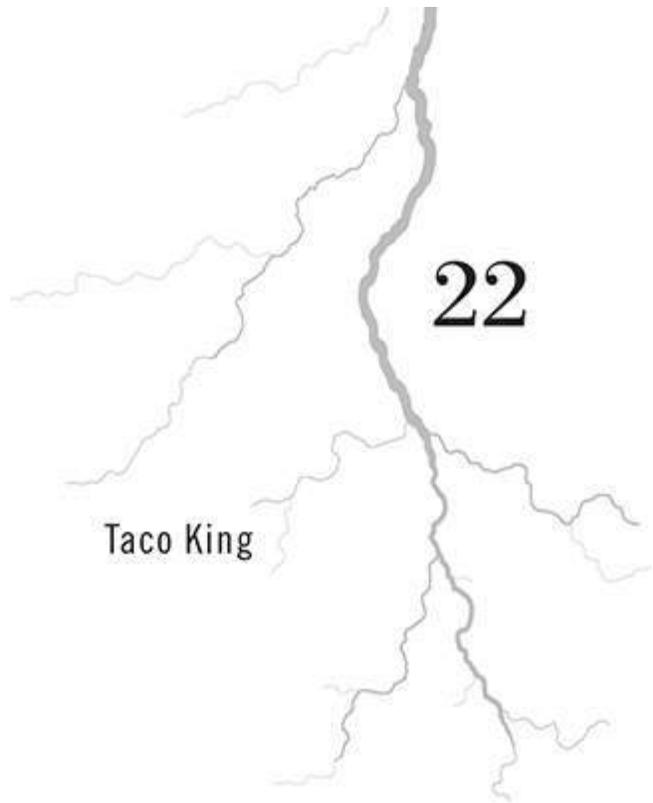
Everyone was still upset, but at least no one spoke out.

As everyone walked to their cabs I said, "Jack, hold on a second."

He turned back. "Yeah?"

I walked up to him. "Back in the plane, you didn't say much about Nichelle. Do you think it's a dumb idea?"

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. But sometimes those are the kind that work."



Our three cabs arrived simultaneously on the corner of Colorado Boulevard and Allen Avenue, just out of view of the Taco King. Once we were all out on the street I asked the drivers to wait; then we walked toward the restaurant.

“Is she there?” I asked Ian.

He looked a moment, then said, “Yeah. I think that’s her.”

“You think?”

“She’s changed some.”

“As long as we’re here, can we get something to eat?” Ostin asked.

“I want something too,” McKenna said.

“Sure,” I said. “But let’s take care of Nichelle first.”

Even though there was a line of cars at the drive-through, the restaurant was mostly empty, with just two scary-looking, twenty-something-year-old men sitting across from each other at one of the side tables.

I walked up to the counter. I could understand why Ian wasn’t sure if it was Nichelle because it took me a moment to recognize her too. She was turned away from me working the drive-through window. She had dyed her

hair bright red with a single black streak and was wearing a black-and-purple cap and a Taco King shirt that looked several sizes too large. She had a tattoo sleeve on one arm.

Nichelle still hadn't noticed us when the boyish-faced kid at the counter asked, "May I help you?" (I swear he looked like he was twelve.)

"Uh, sure." I turned back. "Everyone want burritos?"

"I'll have a taco," Taylor said.

"Me too," McKenna said. "Two, please."

"Two beef chimichangas," Jack said.

"Okay, I think I've got this," I said, glancing first at Nichelle, then back at the kid. "I need eight bean burritos, two beef chimichangas, four hard-shell tacos, and eight large drinks."

"Add a couple deluxe nachos," Jack said. "And some churros. Eight of them."

"I don't want a churro," McKenna said.

"I'll eat yours," Jack said.

"Eight churros," the kid said, punching in our order. "And two deluxe nachos. That's sixty-one fifty."

While I was paying him, Nichelle turned around. It took her a moment to recognize me, but it was obvious when she did. She froze, her already pale countenance blanching still more. All she said was, "Vey."

"Hi, Nichelle."

She looked terrified. "What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk," I said.

She saw the rest of our group and looked even more frightened. She turned to an older Hispanic woman who was putting together orders.

"Carlita, may I take my break now?"

"Not with that drive-through line," the woman replied. She glanced over at me. "May I help you?"

"I'm just an old friend," I said.

"Well, Miss Nikki is working, old friend."

"I'll wait," I said. "No problem. We'll just eat."

"I won't be long," Nichelle said anxiously. She glanced furtively at the others again, then went back to the drive-through window.

We found a table and sat down. A few minutes later the kid who had taken our order brought out our food on two trays. We were about halfway

through our meal when Nichelle walked out from behind the counter. “I’ve got ten minutes,” she said. “Let’s go outside behind the building.”

“Yo, Neesh,” one of the men on the other side of the room said. “Where you goin’?” The man was tall and muscular with tattoos covering one side of his neck and both of his arms. The other man didn’t speak. He was smaller than the first, Hispanic with a shaved head. He was wearing a sleeveless LA Clippers jersey exposing muscular arms and shoulders that were covered with tattoos.

“I just need to talk to these guys for a minute. I’ll be back.”

The second man looked at Jack, and there was palpable tension between them. “Whatcha lookin’ at, *Efe*?” the man said, a dark smile crossing his face.

“Nothing much,” Jack said coldly.

“Chill,” Nichelle said, waving us on. “C’mon.”

We followed her out the restaurant’s side door and around to the back near a Dumpster. There was only one car in the drive-through, and it was at the window.

“How did you find me?” Nichelle asked.

“It wasn’t hard,” I said.

“What do you want?”

“We need your help.”

“What kind of help?”

“I can’t tell you,” I said.

“You need my help, but you can’t tell me why? What kind of proposition is that?”

“It’s secret. But it involves the Elgen.”

“You mean it involves Hatch.”

“Yes. And probably the other electric kids.”

“Which is why you want me.”

“Right.”

She looked down for a moment as if she was thinking. Then she looked up. “Do I get to hurt Hatch?”

“Maybe.”

“You need to tell me more.”

I shuffled my feet a little. “All right, but if you tell anyone, we’ll come after you.”

She lifted her hands. “Who am I gonna tell? Homeboys in there?”

“All right. We’re rescuing someone they’ve kidnapped.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you.”

She thought some more, then said, “You’ll have to pay me. I’m broke.”

“I’m good with that.”

“How much can you pay me?”

“How much do you want?”

“Three thousand.”

“Three thousand dollars?” Jack said in disbelief.

“It’s what I need,” she said, looking at him. “I work for a living.”

“We can’t trust her,” Ian said to me. “A leopard doesn’t change its spots.”

“Yeah, lucky for you I’m not a leopard,” Nichelle replied.

“I can give you three,” I said. “But I’ll have to pay you later.”

“How much later?”

“I can give you a thousand now, and the rest after we’re done. We’ll pay for everything until then. Food and stuff.”

“How long will this take?”

“It may take a while. We’re leaving California.”

“Then what?”

“After we’re done, we’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

She hesitated for another moment, then said, “All right. I take it from those taxis over there that we’re leaving now.”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“No. They’ll fire me. But I was going to quit anyway. Do I have time to get my stuff?”

“No. We’ll buy you whatever you need.”

“That won’t come out of my three thousand, right?”

“No. And one more thing,” I said. “Taylor needs to read your mind to make sure you’re not still with them.”

“Still with who?”

“The Elgen.”

“Do I look like I’m still with the Elgen?”

“It’s the only way,” I said.

Nichelle rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

Taylor walked up to her. “I’m going to touch your arms,” she said.

“You have to touch me?” Nichelle said.

“Believe me, I don’t want to touch you either.”

“Just get it over with.”

Taylor put her hands on Nichelle’s forearms and closed her eyes. Less than a minute later she took her hands off and stepped back. She looked at me and nodded. “I think we’re good.”

“Did it really take a mind reader to tell you that I hate them?” Nichelle said angrily. “I hated them before they left me to die.”

“We’re just being careful,” I said. I looked around at the others. No one looked happy. “All right, let’s go.”

Nichelle took off her hat and apron and threw them on the ground. As we walked around to the front of the restaurant Nichelle’s two friends from inside approached us.

“Where you goin’?” the guy with the tattooed neck asked again. “Who are these losers?”

“Just some people I know. I’m going with them. I’ll be a while.”

He turned to me. “She ain’t goin’ nowhere with you.”

“Yes, she is,” I said.

He swaggered up to me, his face contracting into a sneer. “I say no she ain’t.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Nichelle said to him.

“Who’s gonna stop me?”

“He will,” she said matter-of-factly.

He smiled, his eyes still locked on mine. “Him? Little dude?”

“Idiot,” Nichelle said. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

He looked at her. “What, little man knows kung fu?” He turned back to me with a cocky smile. “You know kung fu?” He pulled out a gun. “Never bring kung fu to a gunfight.”

I looked at his gun, then said, “Want to see something cool?”

His eyes narrowed. “I wanna see you gone, dog.”

“No, really, you’ll like this.” I held my hands in front of me and formed an electric ball about the size of a grapefruit.

He stared at it in disbelief; then looked at me. “What the ...”

“Catch,” I said, pushing the ball at him. It blew up on contact, shocking him so hard he actually left his feet. He landed unconscious and flat on his back on the pavement. The other man looked at me and turned to run but Zeus blasted him, knocking him down as well. He was still conscious but whimpering in pain.

Nichelle shook her head. "I told you, idiots," she said. "Don't wait up for me."

Zeus stepped over the man I'd shocked and lifted his gun. "He won't be needing this anymore."

"What are you going to do with that?" Tessa asked.

"Throw it away," he said.

"Let's go," I said. I turned to Nichelle. "You come with me."

Ian got in the front seat next to the driver while Taylor, Nichelle, and I climbed into the back. "Back to the airport," I said to the driver.

"We're flying somewhere?" Nichelle asked.

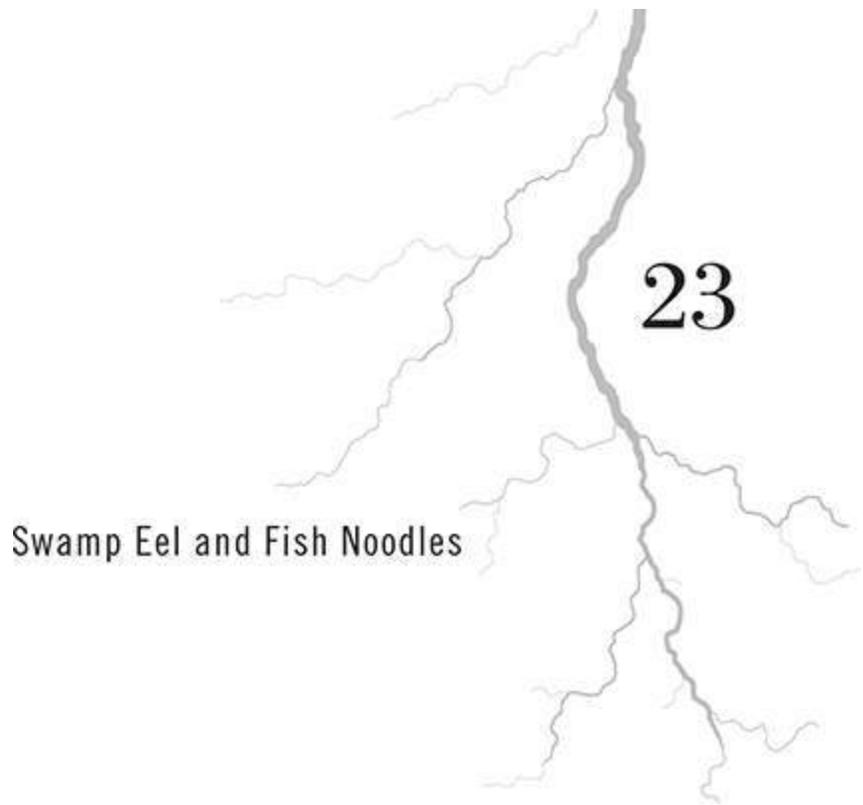
"Taiwan," I said.

"Where's Taiwan?"

"By China."

"For the record," she said, "I'm not a fan of Chinese food."

"That's too bad," I replied. "You're going to be eating a lot of it."



Even though we had hurried back to the airport, we still ended up sitting around for several hours before the pilots returned. Waiting wasn't awful since the private jet terminal was pretty nice. Not that I was any kind of expert on airports. Before I'd gotten involved with the voice, I'd never even flown on a plane, but Zeus and Tessa said this place was a lot better than regular airport terminals. It reminded me of an expensive mall. Tessa and McKenna even got massages.

Since no one had ended up eating much at the taco stand, we ate dinner at an expensive steak house—everyone except for Nichelle, who ate alone at an Italian restaurant at the opposite end of the terminal. After we ate we walked back out to the gate to wait. Ostin read his book while Jack found some cards and he, Taylor, Tessa, Ian, and I played Texas Hold'em. It was a pretty bizarre game since Ian could see through the cards and with Tessa so close Taylor could read our minds without touching us, so she always knew if someone had a good hand or was bluffing.

Nichelle sat away from the rest of us. I didn't really blame her. Everyone was treating her like she had a virus. Most of them wouldn't even look at

her. I know they all had their reasons for hating her—so did I—but still something inside of me pitied her. She had been with the Elgen longer than any of us, and their world was all she knew. If Hatch had raised me I probably would have turned out like her as well.

I eventually gave up playing cards (since, no surprise, I was losing) and walked over to Nichelle. She was sitting on the ground with her back to the wall sketching something in a notebook she had bought at one of the terminal stores.

“Hey,” I said.

She glanced up at me, then went back to drawing. “Hey.”

“Mind if I sit here?”

She shook her head without looking up.

I sat down on the linoleum floor next to her. “What are you drawing?”

“Nothing.” She took a few more strokes with her pencil, then held the notebook up so I could see. Her drawing was bizarre—a skeleton with lightning bolts coming out of its eyes and rosebushes growing inside its rib cage. Truthfully, she wasn’t bad. She would probably make a good tattoo artist. “What do you think?” she asked.

“Cool,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said, going back to drawing.

“So what have you been up to since we left you?” I asked.

“Surviving.”

“Us too,” I said. “Hatch was holding my mother in Peru.”

“Yeah. I knew that.” We were both silent a moment. Then she said, “Did you save her?”

“Yes. But we had to take down an entire Starxource plant to do it.”

She looked up. “You destroyed the Peruvian Starxource plant?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

She looked happy to hear this. “That was Hatch’s favorite. I bet he’s crazy with rage.”

“I doubt I’ll be on his Christmas list this year.”

“If Hatch *did* Christmas.” She suddenly seemed a little calmer. “That electric bubble thing you do is new.”

“Lightning balls,” I said. “That’s what Ostin calls them. I just figured out how to make them.”

“You’ve gotten more electric since I last saw you.”

“I know,” I said. “I keep getting more electric.”

“You’re the only one of us that does that. What does it mean?”

“I have no idea.”

“So now that I’m here, who is it that you’re paying me to help rescue?”

“The Elgen kidnapped a little Chinese girl named Jade Dragon.”

“Is she electric?”

“No. Just very smart. She figured out how to fix the MEI.”

“That’s big,” Nichelle said. “Where are they keeping her?”

“I can’t tell you yet.”

“But Hatch and his stuck-up Glows are going to be there?”

“Yes.”

“Who told you all this?”

“I can’t tell you that either.”

“So many secrets,” she said, shaking her head. She went back to drawing.

* * *

As soon as the pilots returned we boarded the plane and took off. Our first flight was to Tokyo and took about eleven hours. Even though we landed just to refuel, we were on the ground for nearly four hours.

Taylor slept almost the whole way. In fact, almost everyone slept the whole way, except for me and Ostin. He was still memorizing *The Art of War*.

I was too anxious to sleep. The same thoughts kept running through my mind. *What if we fail to save Jade Dragon? What would an electric world be like? What if the Elgen capture us again? What have we gotten ourselves into?* Several times I reached into my pocket and brought out Gervaso’s medal. For *valor* and *bravery*. I felt like a hypocrite even holding the medal. I didn’t feel brave at all.

Our flight from Japan to Taiwan took about three and a half hours. As we prepared to land, I realized that my internal clock was all messed up—it felt like night but the sun was just rising.

“This isn’t Kaohsiung,” Ostin said.

“How do you know?”

“We came in from the east over the ocean. Kaohsiung’s on the west side of the island. And Kaohsiung is a big city with millions of people. This airport is too small.”

“Then where are we?”

Ostin scratched his neck. "That's what I want to know."

Taylor woke. "Where are we?"

"Not Idaho," I said.

"Didn't think so," she said sleepily, closing her eyes again.

* * *

After the plane had landed and come to a complete stop, one of the pilots emerged from the cockpit. "Welcome to Taiwan," he said. "This is where we say good-bye. You can pick up your bags at the bottom of the stairway. One of our associates will be meeting you on the tarmac. Good luck, Electroclan." He opened the door and we all got up and walked to the front of the plane.

Even though it was early morning, the air outside was already hot and more humid than anything I'd ever felt before. It was like walking fully dressed into a steam room.

"I'm not used to drinking my air," I said to Taylor.

"My hair is definitely going frizzy in this," she said.

"I'm going to melt," Ostin said. "I swear it."

Nichelle was the last one off the plane. She hadn't said a word to anyone the entire flight, which worried me. At the bottom of the jet's stairway she looked around and shook her head. "I should have asked for more money."

As we retrieved the last of our bags, a young Chinese man, probably in his early twenties, walked up to us. He was about my size, thin, and dressed simply in denim jeans and a light-blue sports shirt. He had short, spiky hair and a birthmark across his right cheek. He looked us over as if he was counting, then said with a light accent, "Welcome to Taitung. My Chinese name is Chen Jya Lung, but call me Ben."

"Why are we in Taitung?" Ostin asked. "I thought we were going to Kaohsiung."

"We are going to Kaohsiung," Ben said. "But it is far from here."

"That's my point," Ostin said. "Why are we so far?"

"For safety. The Elgen have spies everywhere. They will be watching the airports carefully. Taitung is small, so they will not be watching it. We are one hundred sixty kilometers from Kaohsiung. It will take us maybe three hours to reach our hotel. Do you all have your bags?"

I looked around. "We've got them."

“Good. We will go now. Follow me.” He led us to a small service door a short distance from where we had landed. A Chinese man in a police uniform opened the door for us. Ben handed him a red envelope.

“Don’t we have to go through customs?” Ostin asked.

“There are ways to not do things,” Ben said. “Especially when you do not know who you can trust.”

He opened the door and we entered the main terminal. As we walked through the crowded corridor, it felt like everyone was looking at us. We were the only non-Asians in the airport and, with the exception of McKenna, we stood out. I wondered if McKenna felt that way in America.

“I only have American money,” I said to Ben.

“You will need to exchange it,” he said. “I will do it. We do not want anyone to see your identification.”

I handed him all the money Joel had given me except a thousand dollars.

“You have a lot of money,” he said.

“It’s not mine,” I said.

He took the bills up to a currency exchange booth and returned a few minutes later with a stack of bills. I gave everyone the equivalent of a couple hundred dollars and kept the rest for our expenses.

“Can we get something to eat?” Ostin asked.

“Yes,” Ben said. “We will get food; then we will drive to Kaohsiung. I know you are tired of travel, but it is a beautiful drive.”

We followed Ben out to the airport parking lot and to a long white van covered with Chinese characters.

“Can you read what it says?” I asked Ostin.

“Something like Taiwan Excitement Travel Company.”

“I’m sure it will be,” Taylor said.

After we were all inside the vehicle Ben said, “I know a place in Taitung with good fish noodles.”

“Lovely,” Tessa said. “Nothing I like better for breakfast than a hot bowl of fish noodles.”

“I am happy you like fish noodles,” Ben said.

“I don’t think he understands sarcasm,” Zeus said.

“So it seems,” Tessa replied.

I don’t know what she was complaining about—after all the bugs and slimy creatures she’d been eating in the Amazon, fish noodles sounded normal.

We drove into the Taitung city center and Ben parked the van in front of an open restaurant. We all sat down at two round tables on the uneven concrete sidewalk in front of the restaurant. Christmas music was blaring from a CD player inside the restaurant, which seemed weird to us, but I figured was no different from any other American music to them. I lifted a menu. Not surprisingly, everything was in Chinese.

“At least the Chinese restaurants at home have pictures of the food,” Taylor said.

“You’re not at home,” Ostin said.

“Really,” Taylor replied, looking over her menu. “I thought this was Boise.”

“This is my favorite restaurant in Taitung,” Ben said. “I will make your life easy and order for you.” He shouted something across the room to a woman standing behind a large serving table. A moment later she came out with a tray filled with glasses and bottles of amber liquid. “This is *pingwo sidra*,” Ben said. “Apple soda. You like soda?”

“We like soda,” Ostin said.

Tessa was the first to try it. “That’s not bad. Kind of cidery.”

“Cidery?” Ostin said. “Is that a word?”

Tessa ignored him.

The woman then brought out small plastic bowls of thin broth with chopped scallions. The soup was simple and salty but good. While we finished our soup they brought out chopsticks, soy sauce, and a shallow porcelain dish of red hot sauce, followed by bamboo baskets stacked on top of each other. They were filled with white steaming dumplings.

“What are these?” Taylor asked.

“There’s meat inside,” Ian said.

“I just thought of something,” Taylor said, smiling. “If someone ever gives me a box of chocolates I’m bringing them to you.”

“I don’t like chocolate,” Ian said.

“Not for you to *eat*,” Taylor said. “So you could tell me what’s inside them. That way I won’t have to stick my fingernail in the bottom of each one.” She looked at me. “That makes my mom so mad.”

“These are called *syau lung bau*,” Ben said. “That means ‘little dragon dumplings.’ They are very delicious.”

I had trouble lifting one with my chopstick, so I finally just speared it. Something yellow and oily came out where I had pierced it.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“There is soup inside,” Ben said. “I do not think you have this in America.”

“In America the dumplings are *in* the soup,” Taylor said. “Not the other way around.”

“Try it,” Ben said. “You will like it.”

I lifted a dumpling and bit half of it, and the other half fell to the table. I picked up the other half with my fingers and quickly put it in my mouth. Ben was right. I did like it.

“You may put them in the soy sauce or hot sauce,” Ben said.

“What’s the meat inside of these?” Taylor asked.

“Poke.”

“Poke?”

“Pig meat,” Ben said.

“You mean *pork*,” Ostin said.

Ben looked distressed. “I am very sorry, my English is not always so good.”

“Your English is very good,” I said. “And a million times better than our Chinese.”

“I can’t use these things,” McKenna said, setting down her chopsticks. “Can I have a fork?”

Ben’s brow furrowed. “But you are Chinese.”

“Only my genes,” McKenna said.

Ben looked at her pants. “Your jeans are from China?”

McKenna shook her head. “Never mind.”

Next they brought out bowls of noodles with broccoli and snap peas and pieces of some kind of filleted fish. The skin of the fish was thick and decorative, almost like snakeskin. The noodles were set in a yellow-brown mucus-like broth.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Taylor said, looking at the bowl.

“What is this?” I asked Ben.

“Fish.”

“It looks like a snake,” Zeus said.

“Eat,” Ben said. “You will like it. It is famous in Taitung.”

I ate a few bites. He was wrong this time. It was awful. “What kind of fish is this?”

“It is *shan yu*. I do not know how to say it in English.” He took out his smartphone. “I will look it up on Wikipedia.” He typed in some words, then handed me the phone.

“Swamp eel,” I said.

“I’m going to throw up,” Taylor said.

“You should see how gross it looks *in* your stomach,” Ian said.

Taylor grimaced. “Now I’m definitely going to throw up.”

“Generally speaking, I don’t eat things from swamps,” Tessa said.

“Me neither,” I said, pushing the bowl away from me. I drank some of the apple soda to get the taste out of my mouth.

Ben looked at us all curiously. “You do not like noodles?”

“We like noodles,” I said. “It’s the eel.”

“And the yellow mucus puss stuff,” Tessa added.

“You do not like eel?” Ben asked.

“Only electric ones,” I said.

“Do they taste good?”

“I have no idea,” I said.

The woman brought out more bamboo baskets, which I was glad to see since I was still hungry and the dumplings were good. “What are these?” I asked.

“These are steamed buns with sweet meat.”

“Barbecue,” Ostin said.

They were as good as the dumplings, maybe better. Ostin clearly liked them because he ate like six of them, and Ben ordered more for the rest of us.

We finished eating, then boarded the van and headed off to Kaohsiung. We drove south along Taiwan’s eastern coastline for more than an hour to a small city called Daren, west for another hour to another small town called Shihzih, then back north along the western coast to Kaohsiung, which was the largest and most crowded city I had ever seen. The streets were filled with cars, bicycles, motorcycles, and scooters.

Ben had booked us in a five-star hotel called the Grand Hi-Lai. It was the tallest building in that part of the city and overlooked the Kaohsiung bay. He parked across from the hotel’s entrance, shut off the van, and turned back to speak to us. “This is where we will be staying. Please wait while I get your rooms.” He went into the hotel and about ten minutes later

returned with our room keys. We split up into four rooms: Ostin and me; Jack, Zeus, and Ian; Tessa and McKenna; and Taylor and Nichelle.

“I think we must walk in two or three at a time to avoid suspicion,” Ben said. “It is best if you do not leave the hotel. There are many restaurants inside, but you should only be two or maybe four together. There is a nice mall with the hotel if you want to shop. Do you have any questions?”

“Where are you staying?” I asked.

“I am stay here too. I am in room 7011.”

“Seven, zero, one, one,” I memorized. “What’s our schedule?”

“The Elgen boat *Volta* is still at least a week away. Tomorrow we will drive to look at the Starxource plant. I think you will be jet-lag, so we will not start too early. Maybe around ten.” He looked around for confirmation.

“Ten’s good,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. “We meet in the hotel lobby at ten. I will take you to breakfast. Do you need anything?”

“We’re good,” I said.

“Then we go.”

Ben handed us our plastic room keys, and Jack, Zeus, and Ian went in first, followed by Tessa and McKenna, then Taylor and Nichelle. When it was just Ostin and me, I said to Ben, “Thank you. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“*Shr dyan*,” Ben said. “Ten o’clock. And welcome to Taiwan.”



The Grand Hi-Lai Hotel was the nicest place I'd ever stayed. It had like five or six restaurants and a large fitness center with a yoga room and spa. Ostin and I had a room that faced west with a view of the Kaohsiung harbor. Across the street, twenty-two stories below us, was some kind of temple with green and blue dragons and tigers on its roof. It also had symbols that looked like swastikas.

"That's a Buddhist temple," Ostin said, looking over my shoulder. "The Buddhists and Hindus used the swastika symbol thousands of years before Hitler flipped it around and made it the symbol for the Nazi party. Ironically, the word 'swastika' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'well-being.' The Nazis kind of ruined that for the rest of the world."

There was a lot that I wanted to see, and I kept thinking what a shame it was that we weren't there on vacation.

Ostin and I ordered room service (something we'd never done before), and a waiter brought us Cokes in Chinese bottles, ham fried rice, and barbecue chicken. Even though it was just a little after two when we

finished eating, we were both exhausted, and I drew the room's blinds and we went to sleep.

* * *

I woke early the next morning to the sound of classical music, like a symphony. I tried to turn off the radio, and then I realized it wasn't on. The music was coming from outside our window. I got up and looked out. On the street behind the hotel a garbage truck was playing music from a sound system.

"That's weird. It's a garbage truck," I said. "People are bringing out their garbage."

"They do that in Taiwan," Ostin said. "It's like the ice-cream trucks in America; they play music to let people know they're there. He's playing Beethoven's *Für Elise*."

There was something funny and happy about the combination of garbage and Beethoven.

"What time is it?" Ostin asked.

"Time to go back to bed," I replied, lying back down.

"I'm going to watch television."

"It's just going to be in Chinese," I said, hoping to deter him.

"I know. I can practice my Chinese."

"Practice softly," I said. I pulled the pillow over my head and tried to sleep, but couldn't. About forty-five minutes later I got up and looked out the window again. The harbor was filled with boats of myriad shapes and sizes. The sky was overcast and my view was slightly obscured by fog.

"I think it might rain," I said.

"Rain's never hurt anyone," Ostin said.

"Tell that to Zeus," I replied.

* * *

Ostin and I went down to the lobby a few minutes before ten. Everyone else was already there, though it took a while before I could tell since they weren't standing together. Zeus, Jack, and Ian were sitting in the restaurant, and McKenna and Tessa were looking at jewelry in a display case on the far side of the lobby.

I could see everyone but Nichelle. Taylor had shared a room with her (in part because no one else was willing to, and also to keep an eye on her) and she was standing alone in the center of the lobby beside a massive display of flowers. I left Ostin next to the concierge desk and casually walked up to her. “Where’s Nichelle?”

“She’ll be down soon. She didn’t want to wait around down here with everyone.”

“I don’t blame her,” I said. “How was she last night?”

“Quiet. She went out to buy some clothes. She brought back some pastries from the bakery over there. She gave me one.”

“She gave you a pastry?”

“I know, amazing, right?”

“Anything suspicious?”

“No. She just ate her pastry, then rolled over and went to sleep.”

At that moment Nichelle came walking down the hall from the elevator. She glanced furtively at us, and then kept walking toward the front door and went outside.

Less than a minute later Ben walked into the lobby. He looked at me and nodded, then went back out. I looked around at everyone else to make sure they’d seen him; then we individually started toward the door. It took about five minutes before everyone was in the van. Tessa and McKenna were the last out.

“Do you really think this pretending we don’t know one another is necessary?” Tessa asked as she climbed into the van.

“We don’t want to find out,” Ostin said.

“It is better to be careful,” Ben said.

“I’m hungry,” Taylor said.

“I have a breakfast surprise,” Ben said, then added, “It is not fish noodles.”

“Thank Buddha,” Tessa said.

Ben drove out of the hotel’s driveway, down the street toward the harbor, and then several miles up the coast before we turned off on a side street and parked outside a small open café. “We will eat breakfast here,” Ben announced, shutting off the van.

An elderly man was sitting on a stool in front of the restaurant using the longest pair of chopsticks I had ever seen—at least twenty inches—to lift

long bread sticks from a vat of boiling oil. We went inside the café and sat down.

“What’s for breakfast?” Tessa asked. “Monkey-brain mush?”

Ben looked at her quizzically. “They do not make mush from monkey brains.”

“Glad to know,” Tessa said.

“We are eating *syau bing yo tyau*. It means ‘little cookie oil stick.’”

The man brought over plates with sesame-seed-covered biscuits and a plastic basket with long golden sticks of deep-fried bread.

“How do you eat this?” Taylor asked.

“Fold the oil stick into the sesame cookie, then dip into *dou jiang*,” Ben said.

“Dough what?” Taylor asked.

“Sorry,” Ben said. “Soy milk. He has not bringed it yet.”

“*Brought* it,” Ostin corrected. “Brought it yet. ‘Brought’ is the past tense of ‘bring.’”

“Sorry,” Ben said. “My English is poor.”

“Quit correcting his English,” Taylor said. “It’s embarrassing.”

Ostin looked at her quizzically. “How else will he learn?”

The old man returned and set out a bowl of hot soy milk for each of us. Ben folded one of the oil sticks into a cookie, then dipped it into the milk. The rest of us followed his lead. I thought it was pretty good.

After we had eaten for a few minutes, I asked Ben, “What’s our plan for today?”

He glanced around, then said, “I will take you up to the Starxource plant to prepare.”

“Have you been there before?” Ostin asked.

“Many, many times.”

“We were told the Taiwanese army is helping guard the plant,” Jack said.

“This is true. There are many patrols of soldiers. We cannot go as close as I used to.”

After breakfast we drove north along the coastal road, past flooded rice paddies and old concrete buildings, some surrounded by bamboo scaffolding. It began to rain and Ben turned on the windshield wipers.

“That takes me out,” Zeus said.

“It rains a lot here,” Ben said. “Especially now.”

“Would have been good to know before I came,” Zeus said.

A few minutes later Ostin asked Ben, “Have you ever seen the Lung Li?”

A shadow crossed Ben’s face. He hesitated for a few moments before saying, “Yes, I have seen the Lung Li.” From his tone I could tell that he didn’t want to talk about them. It was maybe another twenty minutes before he said, “We are getting close now. We must be very careful. This is a public road, but the Elgen watch this area because it is near their plant.”

Through the slapping windshield wipers we could see a fenced-in harbor with dozens of boats docked inside. “Is that it?” Jack asked.

“No. That is the *Xing zheng yuan Hui an Xun fang Shu.*”

“I was just going to say that,” Tessa said.

“What is that?” I asked.

“It is the Taiwanese coast guard,” Ben said.

“They’re not going to be helping us,” Ian said.

Ben shook his head. “No, they will not. They will help protect the Elgen. The Elgen give them their electricity.” He pointed off into the distance.

“The Starxource plant is there.”

The Elgen’s Taiwan Starxource plant was made of concrete and surrounded by tall fences—though, from where we were, it was hard to tell how many. As I looked at it my stomach turned and I felt myself twitching. I hoped Taylor wasn’t reading my mind because the only word that I could think of was “impossible.”

Away from the coast the land rose slightly and Ben drove about a quarter mile past the plant, then up a dirt road that led into a bamboo forest, and doubled back toward the plant. A few minutes later he pulled over and said, “We will hike back through the forest so we can look at the plant. We must be very careful. This many Americans here is very suspicious. If we are found we will tell them we are a member of the American Animal Protection Society and we are here to help the civet. Do you understand?”

“What’s the civet?” Zeus asked.

Instinctively we all turned to Ostin. He was obviously used to it because he immediately started talking. “A civet is a nocturnal mammal that is native to the tropical forests of Africa and Asia. It looks like a cross between a dog and a leopard, but its face looks like a raccoon.”

“You’re making this up, right?” Tessa said.

Ostin looked at her blankly. “No.”

“That is right,” Ben said, draping a pair of binoculars around his neck. “They are endangered and some have been found in this area. Recently some have been hit by cars. It is very upsetting to some people.”

“Roadkill,” Jack said.

“Which is what we’ll be if the Elgen find us,” Tessa said.

It was still raining, and everyone except Zeus climbed out of the van and followed Ben to a small, overgrown path surrounded by tall, junglelike foliage. Walking in single file it took us nearly ten minutes to reach a clearing in the forest that looked out over the plant.

“It is there,” Ben said. “Be very quiet.”

We looked out over the expansive compound spread out below us. The plant was situated at the end of a peninsula that extended out from the mainland about two hundred yards, the back and sides of the plant facing the ocean. The landscape outside the fence and concrete was tropical, with palm trees and thick vegetation.

There was only one road in and out of the facility and it passed through four twenty-foot-high electric fences topped with razor wire. The main wall around the facility was concrete with large V-beams supporting more lines of razor wire. The concrete walls had been painted to look like the surrounding foliage. About every hundred yards along the perimeter were concrete octagon-shaped watchtowers with a 360-degree exposure. This compound made the Peruvian plant look like an amusement park.

“They added two more fences in the last month,” Ben said. “I think it is your fault. Because you broke the plant in Peru.”

“It looks like a prison,” Jack said.

“Yes, it was a prison,” Ben said. “The Elgen buy the facility from the government four years ago. Then they added more electrified razor wire, motion-sensor devices, and cameras.”

“Is that all?” Tessa said.

“What are those tents and buildings outside the fences?” I asked.

“They are new. I do not know.”

“They look like army barracks,” Ian said. “There are soldiers inside.”

Ben looked out with his binoculars. After a few minutes he slowly lowered them. “It is the army. They must have decided to station around the plant.”

“You’re freaking kidding me,” Tessa said. “We’re supposed to pass through an army camp, climb over four twenty-foot electrified fences and a

twenty-five-foot concrete wall, with cameras, watch towers, and motion detectors, and not be seen?”

Ben looked at her stoically. “Yes.”

Jack shook his head. “That’s impossible.”

“It’s even worse than that,” Ian said.

“What’s worse than impossible?” Jack said.

“There are landmines in the spaces between the fences.”

“How many landmines?” I asked.

“Hundreds, maybe thousands. They’re everywhere.”

“There’s no way to get in there,” Taylor said.

“Not without a helicopter,” I replied.

“This is a no-fly zone,” Ben said. “They will shoot anything near.” He pointed toward one of the turrets. “They have big guns.”

“Anti-aircraft guns,” Ostin said.

“Of course they do,” I said.

“Maybe they’ll have a public open house,” Tessa said sardonically. “Or a tea.”

Ostin scratched his chin. “I would doubt that. The security con—”

I put my hand on Ostin’s shoulder to stop him. “She was kidding.”

Ostin looked at Tessa, then said, “Oh.”

“How can you be so smart and still be so *dumb*?” Tessa said.

“How can you be so *rude*?” McKenna said.

“Stop it,” I said. “We’ve got enough to worry about.”

“Look,” Ben said, handing me his binoculars. “It is a food truck. You can see them enter.”

“Maybe we could stow away in one of those trucks,” Taylor said. “Isn’t that how you got into the academy?”

“Just before we were captured,” Jack said, grimacing.

I raised the binoculars. A small white van was moving slowly down the plant’s long asphalt drive toward the building. The vehicle was stopped at every checkpoint and surrounded by guards and dogs before moving on to the next.

“They’ve got some kind of X-ray thing going there,” Ian said. “They’re scanning the truck.”

I lowered my binoculars. “So much for stowing away. It looks like they’ve created the perfect defense.”

We all stood there solemnly. Taylor put her hand on my back. After a few minutes she said to me, “What are you thinking?”

“Why do you ask when you’ve already read my mind?”

She exhaled. “All right, sometimes I just like to hear you say it. So you think it’s impossible too.”

“I *know* it’s impossible. Even if we miraculously made it past the army, we would never make it past their checkpoints. And then we’d be captured. Houdini and David Copperfield combined couldn’t pull that trick off.”

“We made it out of the Peruvian prison,” McKenna said.

“We had inside help,” Ian said. “And it wasn’t nearly that protected.”

“And we *still* almost got killed,” Jack added.

“Small detail,” I said. I turned to Ostin. “What do you think?”

“I think the odds are definitely not in our favor.”

McKenna took his arm. “What if we shut down the plant? Then they wouldn’t have electric fences or surveillance cameras.”

“How would we do that?” Tessa asked.

“Same way we did in Peru,” McKenna said. “We shut off the water supply.”

“I don’t see any pipes,” Ostin said. “They probably have them running underground into the ocean. And after what we did in Peru, they probably have them guarded.”

“They’re difficult even for me to see,” Ian said. “But it looks like there are pipes going deep into the ocean. Way too deep to reach.”

“Could we clog them?” McKenna asked.

Ian shook his head. “How?”

“No,” I said. “That still wouldn’t get us in. And remember Joel said not to shut down the plant.”

We were all quiet again. Then, for the first time since we’d arrived, Nichelle spoke. “If you think you can break into that place, you’re crazy. They’ll catch us.”

“Thanks for the encouragement,” I said. “Any ideas?” I asked Ostin.

Ostin thought for a moment, then said, “I think Nichelle’s right. The only way to win this game is to not play it.”

“What?” I said.

“Sun Tzu said, ‘There are roads which must not be followed, towns which must not be besieged, positions which must not be contested.’ This is precisely what he was talking about. If we attack this place we’ll fail.”

“Are you saying we should just give up?” Taylor asked.

“No, I’m saying that we should choose to fight on grounds favorable to us.”

“I’m sure they’ll agree to that,” Jack said.

“What are you thinking?” I asked Ostin.

“They’re going to be moving Jade Dragon out of the plant to the *Volta*. That’s when they’ll be most vulnerable. That’s when we should attack. Instead of breaking into an impossibly guarded fortress, we attack them outside of the fortress.”

“You can bet that will be some armed parade,” Ian said.

“We stopped the Peruvian army to rescue you guys,” Tessa said. “And that was just two of us.”

“They’ll be better prepared than the Peruvian army,” Ostin said. He rubbed his chin, then said, “But we still have one advantage. Hatch probably expects us to be here, but he doesn’t know for sure that we’re here. We need to let them know that we’re not.”

“What do you mean?” Tessa said. “We *are* here.”

“Sun Tzu said—”

“Wait,” Jack said, raising his hand. “Who is this Sun guy you keep talking about?”

“Sun Tzu,” I said. “He’s an ancient Chinese general. He wrote a book about war strategy called *The Art of War*. Ostin’s been studying it.”

“Oh,” Jack said. “That’s legit.”

Ostin continued, “Sun Tzu said, ‘All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.’”

“Your point?” Tessa said.

“Right now, Hatch and the Elgen are most likely focusing all their attention on this plant. The last thing they’re expecting is for us to attack another plant.”

“That’s the last thing I’m expecting,” Jack said. “Why would we attack someplace else? This place is bad enough.”

“If we attack another plant, they’ll think they’ve been tricked and that we had no intention of attacking them in Taiwan. Then their security will be down and we’ll rescue Jade Dragon as they try to move her to the *Volta*.”

I looked back out over the plant. “That makes a lot more sense.”

“This part about attacking another plant,” Taylor said, “we can’t send all of us, or no one will be here to rescue the girl.”

“Right,” Ostin said.

“So you’re talking about splitting us up?”

“Exactly.”

Taylor looked at me. “Into what groups?”

“We can figure that out later,” I said. “First we’ll have to get the voice to approve of the plan, but it makes sense. When it comes right down to it, what other choice do we have?”

Ian shook his head as he gazed at the plant. “Not that one.”

“We must leave,” Ben said. “We have been here too long.”

We headed back to the van. As we climbed in, Zeus looked at us all expectantly. When no one spoke he said, “So, how was it?”

I was ticking pretty badly and everyone was silent.

Zeus frowned. “That bad?”

“Worse,” Tessa said. “Much worse.”

* * *

We were quiet during the drive back to our hotel. After seeing the place, I wondered if they had purposely not told us more at the ranch. Our preparation hadn’t begun to prepare us for what we were facing. Nothing could. Even with Ostin’s plan, the chance of rescuing Jade Dragon seemed far less likely than us being caught trying. The idea of that sent chills through me. We’d escaped from the Elgen twice before. It was unrealistic to believe that we’d be that lucky again. I hadn’t felt that discouraged since Cell 25. It didn’t help that we were all so jet-lagged.

As we approached the hotel, I caught Zeus up on Ostin’s idea about creating a diversion by attacking another power plant.

“Who do you think should go?” he asked.

“I’m thinking you and Tessa.”

Tessa looked at me. “Us?”

“Your powers are perfect for attacking the plant,” I said. “With your help, Zeus will be able to ignite the explosives from a much greater distance.” I turned back to Zeus. “Besides, if it rains here we won’t be able to use you anyway. That is, if you’re okay with the idea.”

Zeus and Tessa looked at each other, then Zeus said, “I’m good with it. I just don’t like the idea of leaving you guys here hanging.”

“If the diversion works, it will do more to protect us than you could here.”

“Then I’m in.”

“I’m in too,” Tessa said.

“Okay. Now we just need to see if the voice agrees.”

When we got to the hotel Ben pulled the van up to the far side of the driveway. It had stopped raining. “There is no need to meet early tomorrow,” he said. “I know you are tired, so we will talk after I hear back from the voice. Remember, do not be in a big group.”

“We’ve got the routine,” Tessa said.

“I will see you later.”

Zeus and Jack went in first. We waited about a minute in between each group. Like before, Ostin and I were the last to leave. Before going to our room, we stopped at the bakery in the hotel lobby and got cream-filled pastries that looked a little like footballs with cream inside. Then we sat at one of the tables in the lobby restaurant. We weren’t alone. Taylor and Nichelle were sitting on the other side of the restaurant. We both ordered a bowl of hot noodles and orange Fanta to go with our pastries. While we were eating, Nichelle walked over. She stood in front of me with her arms folded.

“Vey.”

“Yeah?”

“You know this whole thing is insane, right? I said I’d help you, but I didn’t say I’d commit suicide. If Hatch catches me helping you, he’ll kill me. If I’m lucky.”

“He’ll kill all of us,” I said. She didn’t say anything and I looked at her anxiously. “So you’re not going to help us?”

She took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. “I think it’s crazy.”

“You’ve already said that. Are you in or out?”

For a moment she stood there looking uncomfortable, then she shook her head again. “All right, I’m still in. But if we somehow don’t die, I want double the money.”

She turned and walked alone to the elevator. Taylor glanced at me and frowned, then stood and walked after her.

“I told you we shouldn’t have brought her,” Ostin said.

“It’s a little late for that,” I said.

* * *

Ten minutes later Ostin and I went up to our room. Even though it was barely afternoon I drew the blinds and we both lay on our beds. As usual Ostin fell asleep immediately. In spite of my exhaustion, I was so anxious that I tossed and turned for nearly an hour before I gave up and went to see Taylor.

Taylor's room was just three down from mine on the same side of the hall. I knocked softly. She smiled when she saw me. "What's up?"

"I couldn't sleep. What are you doing?"

"I was about to check out that mall next door. Want to go with me?"

"Sure. What's Nichelle doing?"

"Nothing. She's just listening to her iPod," she said, shutting the door behind her.

We took the elevator to the lobby. There was an entrance to the mall at the east end of the lobby, past the bakery.

The mall was nicer than anything I'd seen in Idaho. It was four stories high and had a Tiffany and Cartier and other expensive stores I'd only seen in advertisements. We stopped to look at a diamond necklace in the showcase window outside Tiffany.

"Isn't that beautiful?" Taylor said, staring at the string of sparkling gems. She turned to me. "Did I ever tell you about the time Hatch offered to buy me a diamond necklace?"

"No."

"My second day at the academy I went shopping in Beverly Hills with Tara. Hatch met us for lunch; then he took me to a famous jewelry store called Harry Winston to try on necklaces. The one I liked was like a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. For about five seconds I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world."

"Then what happened?"

Her expression changed abruptly, revealing the pain she felt in remembering. "He *touched* me," she said. "After they put the necklace on me, Hatch put his hand on my arm and I read his mind. It was the darkest, ugliest thing I've ever seen. It was the first time I realized how much evil he was capable of."

I took her hand. "I can't imagine wandering through his brain. It would be like walking through one of those haunted houses they put up at Halloween time."

She nodded. “That’s exactly what it was like, except it was real.” We started to walk away from the window. “It’s never left me. It’s like once I go through someone’s mind, I have a connection with them.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain. It’s like I understand them.” She looked at me sadly. “After I read his mind I felt dirty. In a way, I still do.”

“He’ll never touch you again,” I said. “I won’t let him.”

She kissed my cheek. “I know.”

We walked around the mall for another hour. Taylor tried on a few blouses but couldn’t decide on anything. Joel had given me plenty of money so I could have bought her almost anything she wanted (except the diamond necklace), but I guess she wasn’t in a buying mood as much as a looking mood. When she finally tired of looking, we walked back to the hotel to get some dinner.

We took the elevator to the tenth floor to the Shanghainese Dumpling Restaurant, which was exactly what the name said it was. A half dozen chefs behind a glass window rolled out dough into saucer-sized circles, added spiced meats or vegetable fillings, then crimped them into dumplings to steam in bamboo baskets. We ate chicken soup, ham fried rice, and three different types of dumplings. Halfway through our meal, Taylor dropped a dumpling into a bowl of soy sauce, splattering it on herself and the tablecloth.

“I give up,” she said, picking the dumpling up with her fingers. “Forks are just better.”

Once we’d finished our meal, our server brought us dessert, a little cake with sweet red bean filling. It wasn’t my favorite, but it wasn’t horrible either. Afterward I walked Taylor back to her room. As we got off the elevator she said, “You’re really worried, aren’t you?”

“You read my mind?”

“No. You’re ticking.”

“Sorry,” I said, forcing myself to stop. Then I slowly shook my head. “I don’t know if we can really do this.”

She looked at me for a moment, then said, “Do you remember what you said to us in the Amazon jungle?”

“I said a lot of things.”

“Just before we snuck into the Starxource plant you told us something your mother always said. ‘If you remember the *why*, the *how* will work

itself out.' Every time that I've been afraid or I've doubted, I've thought about that. You know, we've been worried about what will happen if the Elgen get the information, but there's more to our mission than that."

"What's that?"

"Jade Dragon is not just a scientific formula. She's a little girl. And she's afraid. Could you imagine what it would be like to be unable to speak or hear and to be taken from your family and home by the Elgen?"

"No," I said. I looked back into her eyes. "You have a way of putting things in perspective."

"And you have a way of making me feel safe. I think I have a really great boyfriend." She leaned forward and kissed me. "Now try to get some sleep. It makes me tired just looking at you." She opened her door and went inside.

I walked back to my room. The television was on and Ostin was lying sideways on top of his covers snoring. I figured that he must have gotten up and started watching TV, then fallen back to sleep. I turned the television off and lay back on my bed. In spite of Taylor's encouragement, what we were up against frightened me more than anything I'd faced so far: more than the academy, more than the Peruvian army, more than the *Ampere*. Even more than the Peruvian Starxource plant with its two thousand guards. At least the Peruvian plant had been in the middle of a jungle. This one was completely out in the open with no place to hide.

I still couldn't sleep. It didn't help that Ostin had his snore going. I wanted to smother him with his pillow. A little after midnight I went down to the lobby lounge and ordered a hot chocolate. About a half hour later Ben walked into the restaurant as well. He looked surprised to see me.

"Michael, you are still awake."

"I couldn't sleep," I said.

He sat down across from me. "I think you are jet-lag."

"Probably." I said. "Why are you up?"

"I could not sleep too. I am nervous."

"I'm not nervous," I said. "I'm terrified."

He nodded. "Yes. I am also ... terrified."

I exhaled slowly. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Maybe tea." He waved to a waitress, who came over to our table.

"May I help you?" she asked in English.

Ben answered in Chinese. "*Wo yau yidyan cha.*"

“*Ni yau hei cha, ma?*”

“*Heide hau.*”

She looked at me. “Do you want more chocolate milk?”

I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

She nodded. “Okay.” She turned back to Ben. “*Wo ma shang hwei lai,*” she said, then walked away.

Ben smiled at me. “She thought I was American.”

“It’s the company you keep,” I said. I took a sip of my cocoa, then asked, “How did you get mixed up in all of this?”

“Mixed up?”

“I mean, how did you get involved with the resistance?”

“Oh,” he said, nodding. “After I complete my military service, I work at a computer shop in Taipei. My mother was a reporter for the *Taipei Times*. When the government made the announcement about their agreement with the Elgen to take over Taiwan electricity production, everyone was very happy. There was much celebration. But my mother was not sure. She began writing a story about the Elgen. She traveled to other countries where there are Starxource plants to do research. She even found guards who had left the Elgen and were hiding. She learn about Dr. Hatch’s plan to take over the economies of the countries they moved into. She wrote a long story about this, but it was never published. Her boss at the newspaper kill the story.” His expression fell with his voice. “Then someone kill her.”

I set down my cup. “Someone killed your mother?”

He nodded. “The Lung Li. The police said that it was an accident—she was electrocuted by dropping a radio into the bathtub. But my mother did not like baths because she had arthritis and had trouble getting into them. She only took showers. The day after she died a letter came to me from my mother. She wrote that a group called the Lung Li had been following her and she was afraid for her life. She told me that she was certain it had something to do with the story she wrote about the Elgen. She said if something happen to her, I should hide because they might kill me, too.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “How did you find the resistance?”

“They find me. At my mother’s funeral there was an American man. He introduced himself as a friend of my mother’s. His name was Joel.”

“I know Joel,” I said.

“Yes, I have been working with Joel for three year now. He introduced me to the voice. Have you met the voice?”

“No,” I said. “Have you?”

“No. We only talk on the telephone.”

“I don’t think anyone has met the voice.”

“The Elgen now make almost all of Taiwan electricity. I fear that we are too late to stop them.”

I took another sip of cocoa. “I don’t understand how people can be so blind to what the Elgen are doing. Don’t they care that someone will take their freedom?”

“The Elgen are very clever. People are busy with their lives. It is like people are watching a show on an airplane—they do not know where the airplane is going, they are just watching the show.”

The waitress returned with Ben’s tea and he stopped talking for a moment to drink. After he’d had a few sips I asked, “Did you ask the voice about our plan?”

“Yes. He will call us back in the morning. Until then, you should sleep.”

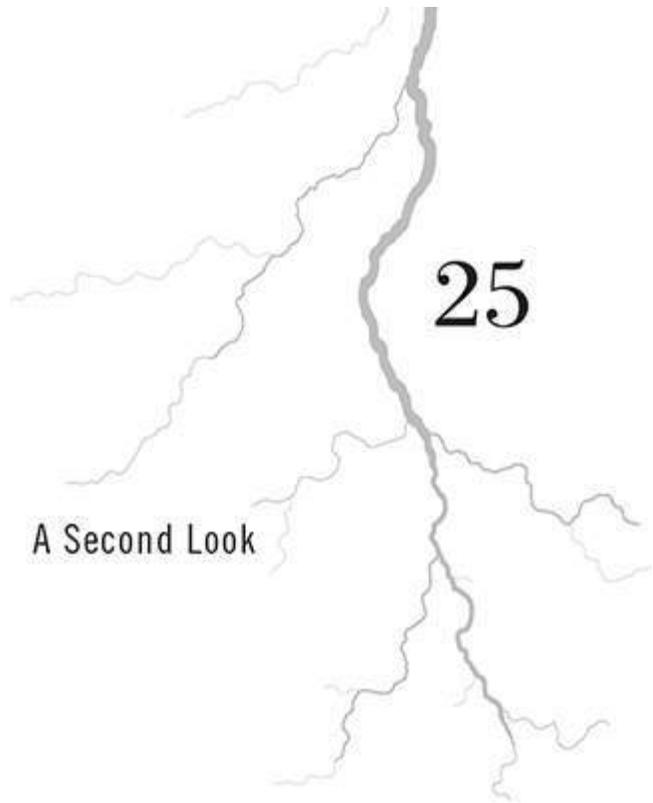
“I keep trying,” I said.

“You must get sleep. We have difficult things ahead.”

“I should go back.” I finished drinking my hot chocolate, then stood. “I’m glad we talked.”

“Me too,” Ben said. “*Wan an.*”

“Good night,” I said. *Difficult things indeed.*



I woke the next morning to Ostin shaking me.
“Ben just called,” he said. “We need to go.”
“Go where?” I said, rubbing my eyes.
“To the plant.”
I sat up. “What time is it?”
“Late. It’s almost eleven. Didn’t you sleep last night?”
“Not like you did.”
“I love to sleep. It’s like being dead without the commitment.”
I pulled on the same clothes from the day before, and we walked out of our room at the same time as Taylor, Nichelle, Tessa, McKenna, and Ian. The hallway was empty except for the housekeeping staff who were cleaning rooms.
“Where are Jack and Zeus?” I asked.
“They’re already in the lobby,” Ian said.
As we walked toward the elevator Taylor asked, “Should we split up?”
“We better,” I said.

Ostin, Ian, and I waited as the four girls went down on two different elevators. We caught the next elevator that opened on our floor; then we walked out of the hotel to the idling van.

“*Dzau an*, good morning,” Ben said as we climbed in. “Are you tired?”

We all looked as if we’d been woken in the middle of the night.

“*Lei szle*,” Ostin replied.

Ben started laughing. “That is very good.”

“What did you say?” I asked Ostin.

“He said he is tired to death,” Ben said.

“He’s the one who slept,” I grumbled.

* * *

Ben weaved the van between several idling taxis, then pulled out of the hotel’s driveway. The weather was better than it had been the day before, with only a few passive clouds blotting a beautiful blue sky. There was also less traffic, and we made it to our destination in less than a half hour.

As we neared the plant we veered off on a different road—one that led us to a coastal outcrop just south of the Elgen’s peninsula and the coast guard station. Ben parked the van at the end of a vacant tree-lined street near a small temple, and we walked, single file, along a stone path to the water, staying behind the trees to conceal ourselves. We could see the silhouette of the Starxource plant from its southernmost exposure. It may have just been the contrast of the clear sky, but the plant seemed to be emitting more steam than the day before. There was a large white-and-red fishing boat docked on the south end of the compound.

“So that’s it,” Zeus said, his voice heavy with dread.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Ben looked out through his binoculars for a moment, then pointed to a place about two hundred yards from the end of the peninsula. “I think that is where the *Volta* will anchor. I have found maps of the depth of the water in this bay. The water near the peninsula is shallow with reefs and sand bars. The size of the *Volta* will keep it from coming too close to the plant.”

He handed me the binoculars and I looked out over the water, following the horizon to the end of the peninsula.

“What is that boat doing there?” I asked. “It doesn’t look like an Elgen boat.”

“It is a fishing boat. The local fishermen catch fish and bring them to the plant. They are there all the time, night and day, bringing tons of fish.”

“Why do the Elgen need so much fish?” Taylor asked.

“For the rats,” Ben said.

“Of course,” Ostin said. “Remember in Peru the Elgen built their plant around a cattle ranch so they would have fresh meat to feed their rats. Here they’re on the sea, so they bring in fish.”

“That is correct,” Ben said. “They have a very interesting process. They drop the fish in a large pool so the fish stay alive until they are fed to the rats.”

“Is that the only pool?” I asked.

“No. There is a pool inside near the bowl.”

“How do the fish get from the pool to the bowl?”

“There is an underwater pipe,” Ben said.

“It’s a huge pipe,” Ian said. “Like ten feet in diameter. It’s located on the bottom of the pool on the side next to the plant. It goes about sixty yards underground into another pool inside, near the bowl.”

“Then what happens?” I asked.

“Hydraulic scoops lift the fish from the inner pool and drop them on the chutes that feed the rats,” Ben said.

“How do they get rid of the water?” Ostin asked. “They can’t get water in the bowl or it could electrocute the rats.”

“The scoops are like cages. Lift the fish but not the water. Then they pass through fans. When they reach the chute, they are dry,” Ben said.

“How many fish do their pools hold?” I asked.

“Maybe tens of thousands,” Ben said. “The pools and the pipe that connects them are as crowded as a Taiwan subway train at rush hour.”

“Could we enter through the pool and go through the pipe?” I asked.

“Not any easier than on land,” Ian said. “There are soldiers and guards watching the outside pool, and the four fences extend down into the pool and the pipe. Breaking in would be the same as aboveground, except you would be underwater, which means you’d be slower and couldn’t breathe.”

“We could use scuba equipment,” Jack said.

“We would still have to get into the pool without being seen,” I said.

“What if we stowed away on a fishing boat and got dropped into the pool with the fish?” McKenna said.

“There’s no way I’m going to get buried in fish,” Taylor said. “I can hardly stand swimming in a lake knowing they’re there.”

Ian shook his head. “Even if it worked, you would still have to somehow cut through four fences underwater. There are guards on top and underwater cameras on each of the fences. It would not be easier.”

I thought about it for a moment, then said, “Okay, then we stick with the original plan. We attack as they transport Jade Dragon to the *Volta*.”

“Which they will have to do with a boat,” Ostin said. “Since, if Ben is right, they cannot dock the *Volta* next to the plant.”

“Yes,” Ben said. “I am right.”

Looking through the binoculars, I could see a floating aluminum-planked dock jutting out from the rock. There was a road coming out of the back of the plant that led to the dock. I handed the binoculars back to Ben. “There’s a small dock there. Is it the only one they have?”

“They have the large dock for the fishing vessels, but for transport vessels there is only that one.”

“So they’ll be taking her from there.”

“What if they use a helicopter?” Jack asked.

“They won’t take the chance,” I said. “They don’t know if Tanner is with us.”

“We wouldn’t crash the helicopter with the girl on it,” Taylor said.

“They don’t know that,” Ostin said. “In fact, we don’t know that.”

Taylor’s forehead furrowed. “What are you saying?”

“If it was a question between killing the girl or letting the Elgen get information from her, we’d have to kill the girl.”

“I can’t believe you just said that,” Taylor said.

“Don’t look at me like I’m crazy,” Ostin said. “Wouldn’t you kill someone to save a hundred million lives?”

“I wouldn’t kill anyone.”

“But what if you don’t kill someone, and they end up killing millions more?”

Taylor just looked at him.

Ostin turned to me for validation. “It’s the logical choice.”

“Let it go,” I said.

“The *Volta* does not have a helipad,” Ben said. “They will have to use a boat. That means there are two places the Elgen will be weak. We can

attack the shuttle boat on the way to the *Volta*, or we can attack the shuttle boat at the dock.”

“Three ways,” Ostin said. “We could also wait until Jade Dragon’s on board the *Volta* and kidnap her from there.”

“There will be many guards on the *Volta*,” Ben said.

“After the *Ampere* they’ll be expecting that,” I said. “The shuttle will be the weakest link.” I looked at Ben. “How far out from shore will the *Volta* dock?”

“Maybe a hundred meters,” Ben said.

“A hundred meters won’t give us a lot of time to intercept the shuttle,” I said. “Does the *Volta* have guns?”

“All the Elgen ships have guns,” Ostin said. “And there are guns on land, too.” He pointed at the towers at the back of the plant. “Fifty millimeter machine guns. The Elgen love those.”

“Whatever shuttle they use will probably have a gun as well,” Jack said. “As well as the guards.”

“Which means they will be shooting at us from the shuttle, the *Volta*, and the shore.”

“At least until we get on the shuttle. They probably won’t shoot at the shuttle with the girl on it.”

“What if they can’t see us?” Taylor said.

“What do you mean?”

“If we could fill the area with smoke, then they won’t know what to shoot at.”

“Yeah, but then we can’t see either,” Zeus said.

“Ian could see,” Taylor said.

“It will not work,” Ben said. “It is too much area to create smoke and the winds are usually strong. It will blow any smoke away.”

“So how do we get to the shuttle without them blowing us up?” I said.

We were all quiet a moment; then Ostin said, “I’ve got it.” We all looked at him. “They wouldn’t shoot at one of those coast guard boats. We’ll use one of those to rescue her.”

“I do not think they will let us use one,” Ben said.

“Of course they won’t,” Ostin said. “We won’t ask, we’ll just take one.”

“How do you *take* a coast guard boat?” Zeus asked.

“Easy,” Ostin said. “We go out in a boat and send out a distress signal. When the coast guard arrives to rescue us, Taylor reboots everyone on

board and we trade boats. It's like we did in Peru to get into the plant."

"That could work," I said.

"It's brilliant," Ostin said. "We take the coast guard boat, then patrol the waters around the *Volta* until we see the Elgen shuttle. Then we stop the shuttle, reboot everyone on board, rescue Jade Dragon, get back on our boat, and speed off to safety."

"But if the Elgen see a coast guard boat around, they won't leave the dock," Ian said. "They'll just wait until it leaves."

"Yes," Ben said. "If there is anything suspicious, the Elgen will think something is wrong."

"What we need," Ostin said, "is to have someone on the shore watching for the Elgen's transfer. That way the coast guard boat can stay out at sea. As soon as they put her on the boat we signal the coast guard boat. The Elgen won't even notice it, they'll just think it's coming back to dock, but then, at the last minute, we intercept them. We'll catch them in the water."

"That could work," I said.

"We need a boat to be rescued with," Taylor said.

"I can get a boat," Ben said.

"We'll have to time our boat-jacking with the arrival of the *Volta*," I said. "Assuming the Elgen want to get her on board as soon as possible."

"That's a logical assumption," Ostin said.

"But what if they don't?" Tessa said. "We're going to be floating around in a stolen coast guard boat."

"We should discuss this back at the hotel," Ben said. "We have been here too long."

I looked back out at the Starxource plant and then past it to the ocean. "I think this will work."

"Will we still need to attack the other plant?" Taylor asked.

I nodded. "The diversion will still take pressure off of us." I turned to Ben. "Any word from the voice?"

"I hope to hear from him this afternoon," he said.

"All right," I said. "Let's go back and wait for his call."

* * *

The drive back to the hotel was much more relaxed than it had been the day before. At least this time we had a workable plan. Not an easy one, but workable.

As I got out of the van Ben said, "I will call you when I hear from the voice. You will not hear from me until then."

As Ostin and I walked back into the hotel I said to him, "Good job. I think your idea could work."

He nodded. "It's no more difficult than attacking the *Ampere*."

I stopped and shook my head. "Yeah, because that was so easy."

* * *

Our room phone rang around two in the afternoon. Ostin and I were both sleeping. I answered the phone groggily. "Hello?"

"Michael, this is Ben. Please you and Ostin come to my room. The voice wants to talk to everyone except for Nichelle." He hung up.

I sat up. "Come on, Ostin. We've got to go."

"Go where?" Ostin asked sleepily.

"We need to go to Ben's room. The voice wants to talk to us."

Taylor was the last to arrive. "Sorry I'm late," she said as she walked into Ben's room. "Nichelle wanted to know why she wasn't invited. She wasn't real happy."

"Tell her it's because we don't trust her," Zeus said.

"That's direct," Taylor said.

"We're just being careful," I said. I looked at Ben. "Go ahead and call."

Ben dialed a number, then hung up. A moment later his phone rang. He put his phone on speaker and answered. "Wei."

A voice said, "Please confirm."

"This is white dragon to lightning rod," Ben said.

"White dragon, please confirm."

"*Yi, ling, yi, yi, yi, jyou, lyou, er.*"

"White dragon confirmed. Just a moment please." There was a pause; then a familiar voice spoke. "Good afternoon, Electroclan. Ben. How is everyone?"

"We're fine," I said.

"Good. I have been discussing your request with the council, and we agree with your assessment that attacking the compound is too risky."

"Ask him if by 'risky' he means 'certain death'," Tessa whispered.

Taylor shushed her.

"We agree that intercepting Jade Dragon in transport is more logical. We also like your idea of creating a diversion. We have discussed our options

and have concluded that the easiest plant to attack is in Samoa. It is a short flight from Taiwan and the Elgen have their smallest presence there—only twenty-seven guards. They also take their water from the sea, but they have an aboveground pump house and desalination plant. We have an agent there who can provide you with enough explosives to take it out.”

“If it’s that easy then why don’t you guys just take it out?” Jack asked.

“That would defeat the purpose,” Ostin said. “The Elgen need to think that we’re there.”

“That’s right,” the voice said. “Have you thought about who you want to send?”

“Zeus and Tessa,” I said, glancing over at the two of them. “The plan is that they attack the plant just before the *Volta* arrives, and then fly back and meet us here to help rescue Jade Dragon.”

“That will do,” the voice said. “We’ve already contacted our Samoan agent, and he’s making preparations. Right now the *Volta* is only a little more than a week out. Zeus and Tessa will have to leave immediately. Tomorrow afternoon Ben will drive them back to the Taitung airport. That will give them some time to meet with our operative and prepare.”

“No sweat,” Tessa said.

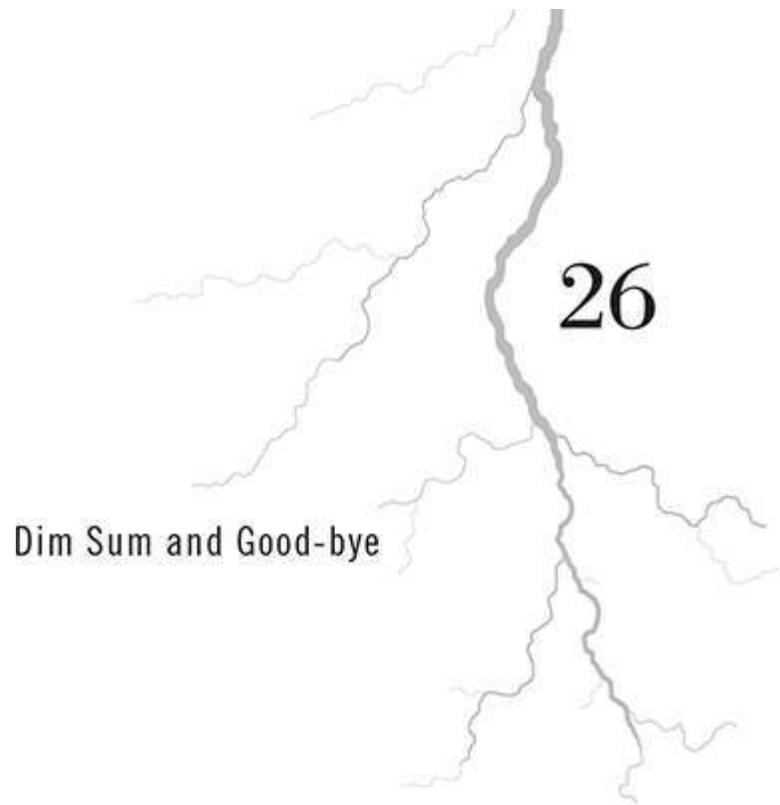
“Just as long as it’s not raining,” Zeus said.

“We’ve checked the weather. There is less than a five percent chance of precipitation. Is there anything else we should discuss?”

I looked around the room. No one said anything. “I don’t think so,” I said.

“Then good luck, Electroclan. We’ll be waiting with great anticipation.”

He hung up. For a moment we all just looked at one another. Then Ben turned to Zeus and Tessa and said, “We will leave tomorrow.”



That evening Taylor and I had dinner with Zeus and Tessa at the Japanese restaurant on the tenth floor of the hotel. The food was good, but Zeus and Tessa hardly spoke. Finally Taylor asked, “Are you guys okay?”

“We’re anxious about leaving the group,” Tessa said.

“I hate splitting the group up,” I said. “But I still think it’s the best move. Just remember, you’re only a diversion. An attempt is as good as we need.”

“You’re saying that it doesn’t matter if we shut the plant down?” Tessa said.

“I’m saying to come back safe,” I replied. “Shutting down the plant is a bonus.”

“I’m more worried about you guys than us,” Zeus said. He glanced around to make sure no one could hear him; then he said, “I’ve got a bad feeling about Nichelle. She’s a bad egg. I think she’s up to something.”

“If she is I can’t tell,” Taylor said. “I’ve read her thoughts a few times. She’s afraid and she’s not happy to be here, but her thoughts have been in line with the mission.”

“Maybe she’s purposely thinking things to throw you off,” Tessa said.

“I don’t think so,” Taylor said. “I can usually tell when people do that, because part of their thoughts are about how they don’t want to think about what they’re hiding. Like, when Michael tries to hide something from me, I always know.”

“Are you saying you knew about the prom?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

I groaned. “At least you know I’ll never throw you a surprise party.”

Tessa looked at Zeus. “Why didn’t you take me to the prom?”

“What prom?” he said. “There wasn’t a prom at the academy.”

“There wasn’t a prom at the ranch either,” she said.

I looked at Zeus sympathetically. “Sorry, man.”

“Just be safe,” Taylor said.

“I was about to say the same thing,” Tessa replied.

* * *

The following afternoon we ordered some Chinese dim sum up to my room and everyone but Nichelle came to say good-bye to Zeus and Tessa. I wasn’t surprised that Nichelle didn’t show. She was probably glad to see them go. Neither Zeus nor Tessa had tried to hide how much they hated her. Not that I could blame them. I had no idea how many times Nichelle had been made to punish them, but living with her in the academy for all those years, I’m sure it was more times than either of them would forget. I’d been tortured by her and I still remembered every second of it.

We sat around eating and talking until Ben looked at his watch and said, “Okay, it is time for us to go.”

“When will you be back?” I asked.

“I will come back with them,” Ben said. “I have friends in Taitung so I will wait until they return.”

I hugged Tessa, then Zeus. “Remember, dude,” I said to him, “you’re just a diversion. Don’t take any chances. We’ll see you in a few days.”

“All right,” Zeus said. “You be safe. And remember what I said about N.”

“I will.”

“While I am gone it is best you stay in the hotel,” Ben said. “Just to be safe.”

“We’ll be okay,” I said.

“Please be careful. The Elgen are very smart.”

“We know,” I said. “We’ll be careful. I promise.”

He looked at me doubtfully, as if he was still unsure. “Okay,” he finally said. “We go. *Dzai jyan.*”

The three of them walked out of the room. After the door shut Taylor said, “A full week cooped up in the hotel? Just shoot me now.”



Over the next two days the six of us spent a lot of time together in my room, playing cards and watching whatever American television shows we could find, which consisted mostly of old Clint Eastwood movies. Nichelle never came over. She was still angry about being left out of the last meeting and kept to herself.

The evening of the second day Ostin, Jack, Ian, and I watched television in the dark while McKenna read in the corner, using her finger as a book light. Taylor was just staring out the window when she suddenly broke. "I've got to get out of here," she said, turning back. "I'm going."

"You're going where?" I said.

"Out," she replied. "I heard someone in the lobby say there's a night market only a few miles from here."

McKenna put down her book. "I want to go."

"Ben said not to leave the hotel," Ostin said.

"It's not going to hurt anyone if we go out for an hour," Taylor said. "No one will know."

"Everyone will know," Ostin said. "We stand out. Except McKenna."

“They won’t know who we are,” Taylor said. “It’s not like we’re the only foreigners in this city.” She crossed her arms. “I’m going.” She looked at McKenna. “You with me?”

McKenna glanced apologetically at Ostin. “Sorry. I’ve got to get out too.”

Taylor looked at me. “Will you come? Please?”

I turned to Ian. “What do you think?”

He shrugged. “I don’t think it’s a big deal. I think Taylor’s right. There will probably be a lot of foreigners at the night market.”

I looked at Jack. “What do you think?”

“I don’t think it matters.”

I knew Taylor well enough to know that she wasn’t going to back down, and I wasn’t about to let her go without me. “All right,” I said. “But only for an hour. And we stick together.”

“Will you come?” McKenna asked Ostin.

“If everyone else does,” he said.

“How about you?” she asked Jack.

“I’ll go.”

“I’m not going,” Ian said.

“Why not?” McKenna asked.

“I’m not into shopping.”

“It’s not about the shopping,” Taylor said. “It’s the looking.”

“I can look from here.”

“I would feel better if you came with us,” I said. “If there’s a problem, you’ll see it before the rest of us.”

He didn’t look too happy about it, but he said, “All right.”

“What about Nichelle?” McKenna asked.

“We’d better at least ask her,” I said. “She’s still mad that we left her out last time.”

“I’ll ask her,” Taylor said.

“We’ll meet you by the elevator,” I said.

While Taylor walked back to her room, I turned off the television and the rest of us went out into the hall. A moment later Taylor walked out of her room followed by Nichelle.

“You’re coming,” I said to Nichelle.

“Thanks for the invite,” she said. I couldn’t tell from her tone if she was being snarky or sincere.

As we stepped into the elevator Taylor handed me her room key. “Would you mind holding this for me? I don’t have any front pockets.”

I took the key from her.

“And my lip gloss?”

“Sure.” I just looked at her.

“What?”

“Anything else?”

She smiled. “Nope.”

The seven of us took the elevator down together. Ostin stopped at the concierge desk for directions, then met up with us near the front doors.

“She says we’ll have to take a taxi. She wrote down the address.” He held up a paper covered with Chinese characters.

We showed the paper to one of the hotel’s attendants, who signaled for two taxis and told each of them the address. Taylor, Nichelle, and I got in one of the cabs, while Jack, McKenna, Ostin, and Ian got in the other. We rode with the windows down, and the cool night air combined with the sounds and smells of the city to create a dizzying panorama.

“Man, we’re not in Idaho,” I said.

“*Definitely* not Idaho,” Taylor said.

Nichelle glanced over at us but said nothing.

Our cabs let us off near the corner of a crowded city block. The night market was a bright pulsating beast of electric lights, music, and throngs of humanity. The pungent smells of food from sidewalk vendors filled the air. Some of the scents were definitely more pleasant than others.

The market took up at least eight city blocks, and the inner streets were blocked off to cars. People flowed between the buildings like a river flooding its banks. Most of those around us were Chinese but, as Taylor had guessed, there were also many tourists and foreigners, which made me feel more relaxed.

“Aren’t you glad we came?” Taylor said, taking in the ambience. “This is a lot funner than sitting in our rooms.”

“‘Funner’ isn’t a word,” Ostin said.

“Did you understand me?” Taylor asked.

Ostin blinked. “Yes.”

“Then it’s a word,” she replied.

We joined in with the crowd’s flow, letting it pull us through the labyrinth of the market. In addition to the stores that lined both sides of the

streets, merchants spread blankets down in the middle of the road to display their wares: knockoff Chanel and Louis Vuitton purses, sunglasses, T-shirts, and a million other knickknacks.

As we passed a booth a man shouted something to McKenna in Chinese.

“What did he say?” she asked Ostin.

“He asked if you want a tattoo.”

“Why would I want a tattoo?” she said.

“They’re not permanent,” Ostin said. “They’re hemp. They’ll wash off in a few days.”

“Why don’t *you* get one?” McKenna said.

Ostin glanced at Jack’s tattoo, then back at her. “Maybe I will.”

“Do it,” she said, making it sound like a dare.

“Okay, I will.” He walked into the man’s booth. The walls were covered with black-and-white paper displays of art ranging from Chinese characters to American cartoon characters. “Check this one out,” Ostin said, pointing to a drawing of a dragon. “I want that.”

“You’re getting a tattoo?” I asked.

“Yes. This one is really cool. It’s kind of like Jack’s.”

“Go for it, wild boy,” Taylor said.

“Why are you encouraging him?” I said.

“It might be good for him,” she said. “It’s probably the most rebellious thing he’s ever done.”

“I’m doing it,” Ostin said resolutely. He said to the man, “*Wo yau jei ge.*” He pointed to the tattoo.

“*Hau, hau,*” the man said. He gestured to a stool. “*Ching dzwo.*”

Ostin sat. The man rolled Ostin’s sleeve up to his shoulder, then wiped his arm with an alcohol towelette. He fished a plastic stencil out of a large box and put it up against Ostin’s upper arm.

“*Jeli, hau?*”

“*Hau,*” Ostin said. He looked at me. “He just wants to know if this is where I want it.”

The man taped the stencil to Ostin’s arm, then turned on a small air compressor. He adjusted the spray on an airbrush, and then, holding it a few inches from Ostin’s arm, began making swiping motions, spraying the stencil with blackish-brown ink. A crowd of Taiwanese gathered around the booth to watch. Ostin smiled at his audience. I think he felt pretty cool.

After the man finished, he peeled back the stencil, then dusted it with some kind of powder.

“How does it look?” he asked McKenna, bulging what little bicep he had.

“Cool,” she said, hiding a grin.

Ostin asked Nichelle, “What do you think?”

“It’s cool,” she said, though she wasn’t even looking at it. I was glad Ostin had asked her. It was the first time someone, other than Taylor or me, had included her in something.

We continued walking deeper into the market. A few minutes later we walked by a booth where a man was selling leather shoes. He was sitting on the ground next to his wares applying MADE IN ITALY stamps to the inner soles of his shoes.

“Look,” I said to Taylor, pointing at the man.

She shook her head. “That’s just wrong.”

“Look at these,” Jack said, holding up a pair of leather sneakers.

“They’re only twelve bucks. And they’re Adidas.”

“Look again,” Ian said.

Jack examined the shoes, then laughed. “Abibas. I don’t care, I’m still buying them.”

“These clothes around here are pretty fashion forward,” McKenna said.

“That’s because Taiwan produces so many of the world’s clothes that they have the new fashions before they hit Europe or the U.S.,” Ostin said.

At the end of the fourth street, a few yards from the corner, an oily-faced man was standing behind a vinyl-topped card table with a crowd gathered around him. On the table were three walnut shells.

“What’s this?” Taylor asked.

“It’s a shell game,” Ostin said. “One of the shells has a pea underneath it. You pay him something; then he shuffles the shells around. Then, if you choose the shell with the pea, they have to pay you. It’s a scam.”

Just then the man pointed at me. “You, Mr. American. You pay five hundred Taiwanese dollar. If you tell which nut has pea, I give you thousand back. You double your money.” Then he lifted all three walnuts, exposing a pea under the middle one. The people standing around him were all looking at me.

“What is that, like twenty dollars?” I said.

“Don’t do it,” Ostin said. “It’s a scam.”

“I can’t lose,” I said. “Ian can tell me where the pea is.”

“Ostin’s right,” Taylor said. “You shouldn’t do it.”

More people gathered around us.

“If he’s ripping people off he deserves to lose,” I said.

“Let’s do it,” Ian said.

Taylor rolled her eyes. “It’s a bad idea.”

“No, it’s not.” I handed the man five hundred yuan. “Okay. Double my money.”

“Sank you,” he said. He lifted the shell again to show me the pea; then he quickly shuffled the shells and stopped. “Where the pea?” he said.

“Which one is it under?” I asked Ian.

“It’s on the right.”

I pointed at the right shell. “It’s under that one.”

The man lifted the walnut. The pea was gone.

“He has it in his hand,” Ian said. “He pulled it out as he was lifting the shell.”

“I told you it was a scam,” Ostin said.

I pointed at his hand. “It’s in your hand,” I said. “You cheated.”

“No.” He put his hands on the two other shells.

“He just slid it into the shell on the left,” Ian said.

I pointed at it. “You just put it there. You cheated.”

“Of course he cheated,” Ostin said. “That’s why it’s a scam.”

“Give me my money back,” I said.

“You lose,” the man said.

“No, you cheated,” I said. “Give me my money back.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “You lose.”

The crowd sensed a confrontation and pressed in on us.

“Come on,” Taylor said. “It’s not worth it. Let’s go.”

“I’m not letting this thief get away with this.”

Suddenly a muscular Taiwanese man grabbed my arm. “You, America, go.”

“Don’t touch me,” I said. I pulled my arm away from him.

He grabbed me again. I spun around on him. “I said don’t touch me.”

Jack grabbed the guy’s arm. “Get away from him.”

The man reached into his pocket.

“He has a knife,” Ian said.

At Ian's warning I surged and the man dropped to the ground like a bowling ball. His head made a dull thud against the asphalt. I turned back to the man with the shells. He looked terrified. "Give me my money. Now."

"Yes, Mr. American, sir." He handed me back the bill I'd given him. I snatched it from him. "You owe me a thousand," I said.

"Okay," he said. "There is no problem." Before I had the other bill Taylor grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away from the man. The crowd parted around us as if everyone was afraid of touching me.

"That was stupid," Taylor said. "Do you know how many people just saw that?"

"The guy was a thief," I said.

"You just called all that attention to us for twenty dollars."

"It's the principle," I said.

"The *principle* is that you just endangered all of our lives."

I groaned. "You're right. I just lost my temper."

"You don't have the luxury of losing your temper," Taylor said. "Save it for Hatch."

Just then McKenna said, "My wallet's missing."

"Oh great," Ostin said. "That's part of the scam. While everyone was focused on the shell game, they were pickpocketing everyone."

"I'll find it," Ian said.

"I'll go with you," Jack said. "I'm going to pound that guy."

"No, wait," I said. "Taylor's right, we need to get things under control." I turned to McKenna. "Just let it go. I'll get you more money."

She breathed out slowly. "All right."

"Let's go," I said.

"Wait," Taylor said, looking around. "Where's Nichelle?"

"She's over there," Ian said, pointing.

Nichelle was standing in the middle of the street while crowds of people walked around her. She had a peculiar look on her face. "Nichelle," I said.

She just looked around.

I shouted louder. "Nichelle!"

She turned and looked at me. She wore a strange expression.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She hesitated before answering. "I don't know."

"What do you mean?" I said.

She looked around again, then said, "I don't know."

Taylor said, "C'mon, let's get out of here."

"Let's go," I said to Nichelle.

We all started walking again.

"What's up with her?" Ostin whispered.

"I don't know," I said.

We walked farther down the street until McKenna pointed to sign in front of a well-lit building. "Shaved ice. I want one."

"It's called a *bing* or *bau bing*," Ostin said. "In Chinese, *bing* means ice."

"I want a *bing* too," Taylor said.

All of us, including Nichelle, who was still acting a little spacey, walked inside the shop. The front counter was lined with bins of brightly colored fruit: mango, guava, bananas, papayas, and many I'd never seen before.

"What's this?" I asked Ostin, pointing to a hairy brown-and-white fruit.

"*Lung yen*," he said. "Dragon eyes. They're good."

The shop's proprietor assumed that McKenna was our translator. "*Nimen yau shemma?*"

She turned to Ostin. "What did he say?"

"He wants to know what we want."

"I want a *bing* with mango."

"*Lyang ge mangwo nyounai*," Ostin said.

"*Hau, hau, hau*," the man said so quickly that it sounded like he was laughing. He held two plastic bowls under the spinning blade of an ice shaver until the bowls were heaped with finely shaved ice. He took two mangoes from a bin, cut the fruit from them, and carefully placed them on the ice. Then he poured sugarcane juice over the concoction, followed by sweetened condensed milk. He pressed a plastic spoon into each one of the bowls, then set them on the counter in front of Ostin. Ostin handed him some money.

"What kind do you want?" I asked Taylor.

"One with bananas and chocolate. And that milk stuff on top." She suddenly smiled. "Look, that shirt over there makes me happy."

"What?" I said.

"That shirt in the window," she said. "I'm going in that clothing store for a minute. I'll be right back." She headed toward the store.

I turned back. "Ostin, how do you say banana?"

"*Syang jyau*," he said.

“*Syang jyau*,” I repeated. “And chocolate?”

“It sounds like chocolate. *Chow-ke-li*.”

The man at the counter looked at me. “You want bananas and chocolate?” he said in English.

I flushed. “Yes, two of them, please.”

He made two more *bings*.

While Ian, Jack, and Nichelle ordered their *bings*, I carried mine and Taylor’s over to the table where Ostin and McKenna were already eating. I sat down next to Ostin.

“Where’s Taylor?” McKenna asked.

“She went in that store right there. She liked that shirt. How’s your *bing*?”

“Delicious. Try it.”

I took a bite—it was delicious—but decided to wait for Taylor to come out before eating any more. After five minutes Ostin said, “Dude, your *bing* is melting.”

“I know. I’m waiting for Taylor.”

“I’ll go get her,” McKenna said.

“That’s all right,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

Just as I stood, Taylor walked out of the store. She looked around for us, then came over. “Sorry that took so long. They didn’t speak any English.”

“Did you buy something?” McKenna asked.

“No. I didn’t like how anything looked on me.”

“I got your *bing*,” I said.

She looked at me. “What?”

“Your *bing*,” I said, looking at her bowl. “It’s melting.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She suddenly rubbed her face. “I don’t think I could eat it. My head hurts.”

“You have a headache?” McKenna asked.

“Yes. It’s weird. It just came on.” She glanced over at Nichelle, who was sitting alone at the table next to ours, then back at me. She leaned close to me and whispered, “You don’t feel anything from her, do you? It feels like ... you know.”

I glanced over at Nichelle. Something was definitely going on with her. She looked spooked. “She better not be using her power,” I said.

Nichelle noticed us looking at her. For a moment she stared at Taylor with a dark, peculiar expression.

“Wait, close your eyes, guys,” McKenna said. “Taylor, your blouse is undone.”

Taylor looked down. “Oh, thanks. I must have missed a button when I was trying on that blouse.”

I took a few more bites of my *bing*; then Taylor said, “I still don’t feel well. Can we go back?”

“No problem,” I said, standing. “Guys, we’re going back.”

“We’ll come with you,” McKenna said.

“Ian and I want to check out some throwing stars,” Jack said. “We’ll meet you back at the hotel.”

“You better ask your roomie if she’s coming,” I said to Taylor.

Taylor just looked at me. “What?”

“Your roommate.”

She still looked at me blankly.

“Nichelle?” I said.

She blushed. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “I just feel so spacey. Will you ask her? I can’t deal with her right now.”

“Sure.” I walked over to Nichelle. “We’re going back. Do you want to come with us?”

She hesitated for a moment, then said, “No. I’m going to stay a little longer.”

Something about the way she said it made me feel uneasy. “All right. Just don’t stay out too late. We need to be careful.”

“Yeah,” she said.

The four of us walked back to the main road and hailed a cab. On the way back to the hotel Taylor leaned forward against the driver’s seat holding her head.

“Still hurts?” I asked.

“It feels like a migraine,” she said.

“Have you ever had a migraine before?” I asked.

“No,” she said.

At the hotel I walked her to her room. “I don’t have a key,” she said. “Nichelle must have it.”

“No, you gave it to me,” I said, handing it to her.

“Sorry, it’s just this headache. I can’t think straight.”

“Do you still think it’s Nichelle?”

“I don’t know. Not from this distance. But I don’t feel like myself. Maybe she learned a new trick.” She forced a smile. “Or maybe I just need some rest.”

“You’ll feel better in the morning,” I said. “Good night.” I leaned forward to kiss her, which, oddly, seemed to surprise her. She smiled apologetically, then quickly kissed me back. “Sorry. Good night.” She opened her door and disappeared inside her room.

I walked back to my room, undressed, and climbed into bed. Something didn’t feel right. I couldn’t figure out what it was, but I felt a growing sense of dread, as if something bad was about to happen. I wondered what Nichelle was up to.



PART SIX



Admiral's Quarters Taiwan Starxource Plant

It was a few minutes past midnight when one of the Taiwanese guards stationed outside Hatch's door knocked. "Admiral, sir."

In spite of the hour, Hatch was awake. He was reclined in his bed, reading. "Come in," he said.

The guard opened the door and poked his head in. "Forgive me for interrupting, Admiral. But there's a young woman here to see you."

"She'd better be my masseuse," Hatch said.

"She claims to be one of the electric children. She says her name is Nichelle."

Hatch set down his book. "Is that right? Has she been searched for weapons?"

"Of course, sir. She's accompanied by two guards."

Hatch sat up, turning his body toward the door. “Go ahead and send her in. Alone.”

A moment later Nichelle walked into the room. When she saw Hatch she stopped, nervously standing at attention. The last time she’d seen him was at the academy in Pasadena when he’d abandoned her in his escape from Jack and the revolting GPs.

“Nichelle,” Hatch said in a low voice that sent shivers up her spine. “What are you doing in Taiwan?”

“I came with Michael Vey.”

“Did you?” he said, leaning forward. “That’s bold of you, to stand in front of me and admit you’re with Vey.”

Nichelle blanched. “I’m not *with* Vey, sir. He just thinks I am. He wanted me to help them kidnap someone from you. A Chinese girl. I came because it was my only way to get back to you.”

Hatch studied her carefully. “Do you know where Vey is?”

“Yes. I can lead you to him. And the others.”

Hatch was quiet for another moment, then said, “Why did you really come, Nichelle?”

Nichelle swallowed. “I want to be part of the family again.” She stopped and her eyes welled up. “It’s hard out there. In the Nonel world I’m nothing special. I’m just another chicken.”

“And you want to be an Eagle again,” Hatch said. “Do Vey and his fellow terrorists know you’re gone?”

“They think I’m still at the night market. But they hate me anyway, so they don’t care.”

“Do you think they suspect you would come here?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“They think I hate you.”

Hatch drummed his fingers on his desk. “Why would they think that?”

“After you left me at the academy ...” She took a deep breath. “They just do.”

Hatch’s eyes narrowed. “Do you hate me, Nichelle?”

Nichelle hesitated, frightened by his stern gaze. “I felt betrayed. I was hurt.”

“But do you hate me?”

“I did.”

“But you don’t now?”

“I want to come back. Please, sir.”

He looked her over a moment more, then said, “Where is Vey?”

“He’s with the others at the Grand Hi-Lai Hotel in Kaohsiung. They’re in suite numbers 2273, 2275, 2285, and 2287.”

“Who is with Vey?”

“Taylor, Ostin, Ian, McKenna, and Jack.”

“No Zeus?”

“He was with us. But he and Tesla left.”

“Tesla? My deserter. Where did she come from?”

“I don’t know. She was with them when they came for me, sir.”

“They must have found her in Peru. I look forward to seeing her again. And Frank,” he said, curling his lip. “I’m especially looking forward to reuniting with Frank. Are there any members of the resistance with them?”

Nichelle looked at him, perplexed. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“How did you get here?”

“Vey came for me in California. I don’t know how he found me. I was working at a taco stand. He had a private plane. I don’t know where he got it.”

“He didn’t mention any organization?”

Nichelle’s forehead furrowed. “You mean the Electroclan?”

“No. The organization that is flying him around the world.”

“He said someone was helping him but he didn’t tell me who. I didn’t ask. I didn’t want to raise suspicion.”

Hatch stood, his eyes locked on her. “All right. I’ll send guards over to the hotel. If what you’re telling me is true, I will let you back in the family with full privileges.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I want you there with my guards, to help keep Vey and his friends under control.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“That’s all for now. Wait out front and someone will come for you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You can go.”

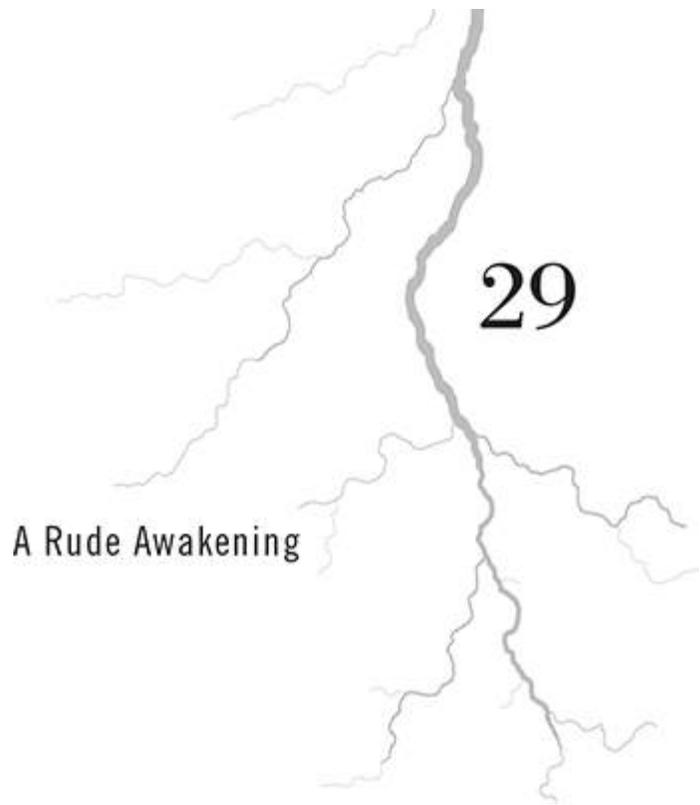
She took a few steps toward the door; then Hatch said, “Nichelle.”

She turned back. “Yes, sir?”

“Welcome back, Eagle.”



PART SEVEN



**Grand Hi-Lai Hotel
Kaohsiung, Taiwan**

It was almost three in the morning when I was woken by a knock at my door. I stumbled to it. “Who’s there?”

Ostin rolled over and mumbled something but didn’t wake.

“Michael,” Ian said. “It’s me.”

I walked to the door and opened it. Jack and Ian were both standing in the hallway. “What is it?”

“Nichelle just got back to her room,” Ian said. “She’s been out all night.”

“All right,” I said. “Let’s see where she’s been.”

I put on some pants, and we walked over to Taylor and Nichelle’s room. I knocked on the door and Nichelle answered. She looked afraid.

“Where have you been?” Ian asked.

“None of your business,” she said.

“Your business *is* our business,” he replied.

“Where have you been, Nichelle?” I asked.

“Out,” she said.

We all just stared at her.

“Look, I know you guys hate me, all right? It’s not exactly a secret. I didn’t want to hang out with any of you either. You okay with that?”

I glanced over at Ian.

“I don’t trust her,” he said. “She looks like we caught her doing something. Her heart is beating faster than usual.”

“It’s been beating faster than usual since I saw your suicide plan to attack the Starxource plant. If Hatch catches me, he’s going to torture me for helping you. Am I supposed to be calm?”

“Maybe we should have Taylor read her mind,” Jack said. “Ask where she’s been.”

“Fine,” she said. “Have your girlfriend read my mind. Like I care what any of you dorks think.”

I looked over. Taylor stirred. “We’ll do it in the morning,” I said.

Ian pointed at Nichelle. “You watch yourself.”

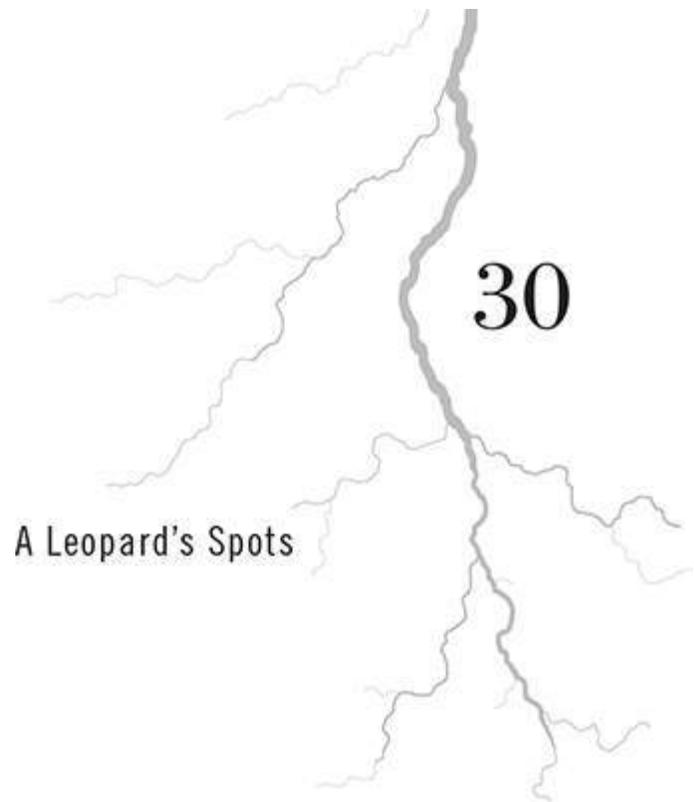
“I don’t need to,” she said. “You watch everything, you pervert.”

Ian’s face hardened. I thought he might punch her.

“Let’s go,” I said, taking Ian by the arm.

“She’s bad,” he said. “To the core.”

We went back to our rooms to get some sleep.



The sun still hadn't risen when I was woken again by pounding on our door. "Michael, open up!" a voice shouted.

"Who is it?"

"It's Ian. Open now!"

I stumbled to the door and opened. Jack and Ian pushed past me into the room and slammed the door behind them. "The Elgen found us."

The words sent chills through me. "Where are the girls?"

"They've already captured them. The guards have them down the hall with RESATs on."

"What about Nichelle?"

"She's with them," Jack said. "She's the one who led them to us."

"What's going on?" Ostin said.

"Get up," I said. "The Elgen are here."

"Crap. Where?"

"They're right outside," Ian said.

"Let's block the door," Jack said.

Jack and Ian slid our dresser lengthwise up against the door.

Then a voice from the hallway shouted, "Open up!"

"Yeah, right," Jack said.

"We'll blow a hole through the wall if we need to," the voice said.

"They've got explosives," Ian said. "They've strapped explosives to McKenna."

"No," Ostin said.

"So if she flares she kills herself," I said. "They're getting smarter. How many guards are there?"

"At least thirty." He paused. "Some of them are dressed differently. They're wearing all black."

There was suddenly a high-pitched metallic sound.

"What's that?" I asked.

"They're drilling," Ian said.

Within seconds a drill bit poked through the middle of the door. The bit was removed and replaced by a miniature camera lens.

"They can see us," Ian said.

"The ones in black," Ostin said. "Is there a patch on their uniform?"

"Yes. It's a dragon head."

Ostin shook his head. "Looks like we're going to meet the Lung Li after all."

"Come out of the room," Nichelle said, "and no one will be hurt. They promise."

"The Elgen don't make promises!" I shouted. "And if they do they don't keep them. Just like you."

"Your plan was a suicide mission from the beginning," Nichelle said. "They would have caught you and executed you. This way they'll let you live."

"No, they won't," I said.

"She's telling the truth!" Taylor shouted through the door.

Ian suddenly grabbed his eyes, groaning. "Ah!" He fell back. "It's Nichelle."

I could feel her too. For a moment there was a struggle between us. I began pulsing and pushing against Nichelle until I heard her scream. The pain stopped. Ian staggered to his feet. He was soaked with sweat.

An amplified voice said through the doorway, "Admiral Hatch has authorized us to kill you all. Starting with this one. I am counting down."

I looked at Ian. "Who is he talking about?"

“He’s holding a gun to McKenna’s head.”

I glanced at Ostin. He looked terrified. “Can you deflect their bullets?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Not if he has the gun to her head.”

“Ten, nine, eight ...”

“All right!” I shouted. “I’ll come out.”

“You’ll all come out, or we’ll shoot her, then open fire on you. We’ll shred the entire room.”

“They’ve got machine guns,” Ian said. “Big ones.”

“We’re dead either way,” I said.

“Seven, six, five, four ...”

“Stop!” I shouted. “We’re coming.”

“Hold your fire,” the voice said.

“What are they doing?” I asked Ian.

“They still have the gun to McKenna’s head.”

“Michael Vey, before we open the door, let me be very clear. If you don’t do exactly what we say, there will be no warning. We’ll kill the girls first, then we’ll blow the rest of you away.”

“We’ll do what you say,” I said.

“Move the furniture from the door.”

I looked at Jack. “Do it,” I said.

Ian and Jack pulled the dresser back.

“Now open the door,” the voice said. “I want you in front, followed by Ian, Jack, and Ostin, in that order. All of you put your hands on your head. Do you understand?”

“We understand,” I said.

I opened the door. An Elgen captain in the requisite black-and-purple uniform was standing in front of the door.

“Vey, come forward and kneel. Put your hands behind your back.” I walked into the hallway, then knelt down in front of six guards holding guns and RESAT guns. Through my peripheral vision I could see the Lung Li in their solid black uniforms and helmets. Something about them sent shivers through me. They seemed almost nonhuman. Taylor was kneeling on the ground next to them. I hoped she would look at me, but she didn’t.

A guard holding carbon handcuffs said to the guards next to me, “If he shocks us, shoot him, then the girls.”

“I won’t,” I said.

A guard grabbed my wrists and pulled them up while another guard handcuffed me, then strapped a RESAT over my chest and turned it on. So much pain shot through my body that I fell to my side, unable to breathe.

“Stand up!” the first guard shouted. He might as well have commanded me to fly. The pain was so intense that I couldn’t even answer him. He and the other guard lifted me and pushed me against the wall, but as soon as they released me I collapsed again.

“Stand up!” the guard shouted again.

I somehow forced out, “It’s ... too ... much.”

They looked at each other; then the second guard pulled out a remote and adjusted my RESAT. The pain lessened. It was still high but not so much that I couldn’t stand.

They followed the same routine with the others, strapping boxes on Ian, Jack, and Ostin. This time the boxes they put on Jack and Ostin looked different. They looked like RESATs but they were black and red. Ostin groaned when they turned his on.

“They figured it out,” he gasped.

A door across the hall opened and a middle-aged Chinese man looked out.

“*Ni gan shemma?*” he shouted.

One of the Lung Li fired something at the man, and he fell forward unconscious at their feet. Two of them dragged him back into his room, disappearing for a few minutes before emerging back out into the hall.

The captain spoke into his radio, saying that the enemy had been secured, and then, with the Lung Li guards at the front and back of our procession, the guards marched us down the hall to a utility elevator. As we walked past Nichelle, Jack lunged at her. One of the guards caught him and slugged him in the stomach. He fell to his knees, gasping for breath.

“Get up!” the guard shouted. “Or we’ll throw you out one of these windows.”

Jack struggled to his feet. He looked at Nichelle. “How could you do this?”

Nichelle’s eyes narrowed. “Ian said it. ‘A leopard doesn’t change its spots.’”

As I walked by her I looked her in the eyes. “I believed in you.”

“Then you’re an idiot, Vey. I don’t even believe in me.”

“Shut up and keep moving,” the guard behind me said.

They were in a hurry to get us out of the hotel, so they crowded us into two elevators, with two guards holding each of us. Ostin was in front of me and Taylor was in front of him. I noticed she was leaning against the elevator's sheet metal wall. I leaned against the side wall and thought, *Taylor, nod your head if you can hear me.* She didn't move. *We're going to get out of this. Move your head against the wall.* Still nothing. The RESAT must have been sucking everything out of her.

The doors opened below ground level into a room with concrete walls, electrical panels, and thick floor-to-ceiling pipes. "Move with your guards," the captain ordered. The Elgen took us out a back door to where four large vans were idling. The vans were tall and black with the sky-blue Elgen logo and the words STARXOURCE POWER written out in English below Chinese characters.

Ostin and I were taken in the first van, Ian and Jack in the second, and McKenna, Nichelle, and Taylor in the third. I hoped that Nichelle wouldn't torture them, but she didn't need to—the RESATs were doing it automatically.

They strapped me to the wall, then pushed some buttons on my RESAT, and the machine hummed louder as more pain shot through my body. I gasped in agony.

Ostin was strapped to the opposite wall. His shirt was soaked in sweat. "I liked the old RESATs better," he said.

They slammed the van's back doors and the vehicle immediately lurched forward, rocking us from side to side. The only light in the back of the van came from the green and amber LEDs on our RESATs and from my glow, which was dimmer than usual, affected by the RESAT.

"Something's not right," Ostin groaned.

"No kidding," I said.

In spite of his pain, he continued to puzzle. "If Nichelle led them to us, she would have told them who was with us."

"She did," I said.

"Then they would have known Taylor was with us. Why weren't they wearing those mind helmets?"

"Because they had guns," I said. "And they outnumbered us five to one."

"That's never stopped them before. And the light on her RESAT wasn't even on."

I had no answer.

“Remember at the night market when you asked Taylor about her roommate, and she acted like she didn’t know who it was? After we left did she do anything else out of the ordinary?”

I thought about how strangely she had acted when I went to kiss her.

“Yes, but she had that headache. She said she wasn’t feeling like herself.”

Sweat was dripping down Ostin’s face and he groaned out in pain. Then he said, “Maybe that’s because she *wasn’t* herself.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t think that was Taylor.”



PART EIGHT



The only thing Taylor remembered about being captured at the night market was seeing Tara, her twin sister. For a second she thought she was looking at her own reflection in a mirror until Tara squinted, and paralyzing horror filled her so completely that she collapsed. Then someone powerful, someone she never saw except for the black material of their shirtsleeve, held a cloth over her nose and mouth. When she woke she was lying on the floor of a dim concrete cell, wearing different clothes, her head throbbing. She was wearing a RESAT, but it didn't seem to be on. The whole situation was like a nightmare except she wasn't asleep. *Where am I?*

As she lay there, something moved in the shadows on the opposite side of the room. It took her a moment to realize that it was a child. *What is a child doing in my cell?* Then the thought came to her—the girl was Jade Dragon. She looked even younger than nine years old. Her black hair was cut in bangs, cropped short above eyes that were so dark her pupils were invisible. She had full, pouty lips and her nose was slightly turned up.

Taylor stood, steadied herself against the wall, then slowly walked over to her. The little girl watched her curiously, but avoided eye contact.

Taylor crouched down in front of the child so they were about the same height. “You’re very pretty,” she said.

The girl said nothing.

“You should meet my friend McKenna. She looks like you.”

The girl stood as still as a statue.

“You can’t hear me, can you? Can you read my lips?” She thought of what Chinese she had picked up in the few days she’d been in Taiwan. “*Ni hau.*” The child looked at her and blinked. Taylor walked closer and reached out her hand. “I heard your name in Chinese. I think it’s Yoo Loong.” The girl stared curiously at Taylor’s glowing skin. “It’s okay. It won’t hurt you.”

The girl reached out and touched her, then retracted her hand. Taylor nodded. “It’s okay. You can touch me. I came to help you.” Taylor moved forward and started to put her arms around the girl, but Jade Dragon stiffened and groaned.

Taylor immediately released her. “I’m sorry. You don’t like that.” She tried to remember what she knew about autism. For several weeks they had studied autism in her health class. She remembered learning that some autistic children were hypersensitive to touch.

“I’m sorry,” Taylor said. “This whole thing must be so awful for you.”

The little girl looked at her for a moment, then, to Taylor’s surprise, stepped forward and touched Taylor’s arm again. This time she grabbed on to it and something peculiar happened. Taylor was drawn into the girl’s mind, as if the girl had hijacked her power. It was unlike anything she had experienced before. She couldn’t understand the Chinese words in the child’s head but she could understand the meanings and feelings that accompanied the language. It was the difference between the letters *A-P-P-L-E*, and biting into the crisp, red fruit. She was communicating better than she ever had before, understanding without words—something Taylor had not even known was possible.

She now knew, without a doubt, that this was the child they called Jade Dragon. She was inside the child’s brain, a participant of her past and present, in a way she’d never experienced with anyone before. Usually when she read someone’s mind she caught glimpses of their thoughts—language and symbols appearing in her brain like text messages. But now she felt as if she were standing in the middle of a theater and seeing the

child's thoughts and memories on screens around her. Was it the autism? Or was it the power of the child's mind?

She could see the Elgen guards, the Lung Li, dressed all in black, grabbing Jade Dragon, taking her from her home accompanied by feelings of fear and confusion and curiosity. She saw her parents on the ground. Motionless. She could feel the prick as the Lung Li put a needle into her arm, then the mind-numbing drug spreading through her body as everything went dark. She could see, on another screen, thoughts poured out in numbers.

Suddenly math problems she hadn't understood made sense. Except now they weren't just numbers and equations, they were patterns and colors. Calculus, geometry, and trigonometry were easy to understand, simple as a game, like shooting balls at a basketball hoop that was a hundred feet wide. Then a specific sequence of numbers, letters, and symbols started running through her mind.

$$s(t; t_y) = k \frac{Q}{r^2} \hat{r} \int_{R^2} m(x, y) e^{-2\pi i \gamma \left(\frac{G_x x t + \gamma G_y y t_y}{2\pi} \right)} dy dx$$

She almost said the equation when a powerful thought came over her not to speak it out loud—that she must not ever divulge it. Somehow she knew that what she was receiving was something of great importance, even if she had no idea what it meant.

$$s(t; t_y) = k \frac{Q}{r^2} \hat{r} \int_{R^2} m(x, y) e^{-2\pi i \gamma \left(\frac{G_x x t + \gamma G_y y t_y}{2\pi} \right)} dy dx$$

Taylor looked at the girl. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

The child just stared at her. She saw a glimpse again of the Elgen soldiers, then suddenly all the screens turned to white and the girl's thoughts flashed into blinding fear. Anger and fear. Then Taylor left Jade Dragon's mind, or, more accurately, Jade Dragon let go of her.

"What's happening?" Taylor asked.

The girl was looking over Taylor's shoulder. Taylor turned back to see what she was looking at, but saw nothing. Then she heard the hiss and click of a pneumatic lock. The cell door swung open and a Caucasian Elgen captain dressed in black and purple walked in flanked by two other guards.

All the men wore mindwave helmets. *How did she know they were coming?* Taylor thought.

“It’s good to see you again, Ms. Ridley.”

“I don’t know you,” Taylor said.

“You don’t remember me from Idaho?”

“You’re an *Elgen*. That’s all I need to know.”

“You make that sound so ... *repulsive*.”

“It is.”

The captain smiled darkly. “If you want repulsive, you should see feeding time in the bowl. Especially when the meal is human flesh.”

“I’ve heard about it.”

“Hearing and seeing are not the same thing. Until you actually see someone fed to the rats, you can’t fathom the horror of thousands of tiny pointed teeth tearing the flesh away from live muscle, muscle away from bone, the little beasts seeking the tender meat inside, burrowing under skin.”

Taylor turned white.

“What I find most remarkable about the human feedings is the perseverance of the human body. You’d be surprised at how long people actually stay alive while it happens. Sometimes we make bets on it. Of course, lowering our victims feetfirst into the bowl does make a difference. It adds at least a full twenty seconds to the misery.”

Taylor felt as if she might throw up.

“Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“No.”

“You should.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small brown biscuit. “Have you ever seen one of these?”

Taylor shook her head.

“They’re called Rabisk. Along with fresh meat, it’s the primary food we feed our rats. These tasty little biscuits are made from the bodies of the dead rats we collect from the bowl. So follow me here: Our enemies are eaten by the rats; the rats eventually die and are made into Rabisk, which are then again fed to the rats; the rats die and are again made into Rabisk. So, if you think about it, our enemies are fed to the rats over and over and over again. It’s reincarnation. They’ll spend all eternity as rat food. It’s a horrific thought, isn’t it?”

“You’re sick,” Taylor said. “All of you.”

The man smiled. "I shouldn't waste your time telling you about it. You have so little time left before you experience it yourself."

"I don't want to see it," Taylor said.

"You won't just see it," he said. "You're going to feel it. Smell it. You're going to hear the high-pitched shrieks of ten thousand ravenous rats as they swarm over your body like bees on honeycomb, seeking the moist meat under your skin." Taylor froze. "Yes, dear. We're going to feed you to them. Both of you."

Taylor's knees gave out and she fell to the concrete floor.

"Good. I see you're finally comprehending the predicament you're in."

Jade Dragon walked over and knelt down next to her. When Taylor could speak she said, "Please, no."

He threw the biscuit on the floor next to her. It broke into several pieces. "Whether you're an eternal rat meal or not is completely up to you. There's only one way you can spare yourself that fate. You do this one thing and I'll escort you out of here myself, *with* the child, and put you on a plane home."

"What do you want?"

"We need a scientific formula that's in this little girl's head. You get the girl to give you the formula and we let you go." He put out his hand and one of the guards handed him a pad of paper and a pen. "We don't care how she gives it to us. Just write it down here."

"I'm not a scientist. How would I know what the formula is?"

"We'll know," he said. "And so does she. She just needs to dictate it to you. So if I were you, I'd keep chumming up to this little genius until she spills her secrets. Because you've got eighteen hours until feeding time."

"My friends will rescue me before then."

The other two guards who had stood quietly at attention suddenly laughed. The captain smiled, then said, "Sorry, you're not in on the joke. The question is, who's going to rescue them?" He threw the pad and pen to her. "Get the formula, write it down. Or spend eternity as Rabisk."

He spun on his heels, and he and his guards left the room, the heavy, metal door slamming shut behind them. Taylor looked down at the pad, then back at Jade Dragon. The formula was still in her head. All she needed to do was write it down. She might save her own life, but she would doom the lives of thousands of others. Taylor's eyes filled with tears. "We'll get out of here. I don't know how, but we will."

She turned away and wiped her eyes. When she looked back, Michael was standing where Jade Dragon had been. “Michael ...” She stood. “How did you get in here? Where’s Jade Dragon?”

Michael just looked at her.

“Never mind, I don’t care how you got here.” She threw her arms around him. He stiffened, squirming beneath her embrace. “Michael, what’s wrong?” She stepped back. It wasn’t Michael in her arms, it was Dr. Hatch. She screamed as she fell back. Hatch started laughing.

The pneumatic door lock again hissed and clicked; then the door opened. Tara walked into the room.

“Hello again, Sis.”

“Tara.” She turned back to see Jade Dragon standing against the wall where Hatch had just been. “What are you doing?”

Tara smiled. “I was just having a little fun. Like my new trick?”

“You’re psychotic,” Taylor said.

Tara smiled. “Now, Sis, don’t be so judgmental.” She turned into Taylor’s mom. “I mean, you’re the one having delusions.”

“Stop it!” Taylor shouted.

Tara laughed as she changed back to herself. “Have you figured it out yet, Sis?”

“Figured what out?”

“That you’re on the losing team. While you were destroying one Starxource plant, we built five more.” She stepped toward Taylor, and Jade Dragon looked curiously back and forth at the girls’ identical faces. “And soon you won’t be special. There will be thousands of people with powers just like yours.”

“And yours,” Taylor said.

“Real power comes from position,” she said. “That’s what I have. Someday we’re going to run this place.”

“Real power comes from someplace else,” Taylor said.

Tara smiled. “What are you going to say next, that power comes from the heart?”

“And mind,” Taylor said, rebooting her sister. While Tara was still confused, Taylor lunged at her, pushing her up against the wall. Then they both fell to the floor, wrestling.

A voice came over the cell audio system. “Occupants of Cell 19, stop your fighting immediately.” The voice was followed by a loud, high-pitched

squeal, and Taylor suddenly screamed as she fell back from Tara. Her RESAT was squealing and the lights were flashing in rapid succession.

“It’s too much!” Taylor shouted. “Stop! Stop!”

Tara stood, wiping her face. There was blood on her hand.

“You made me bleed.”

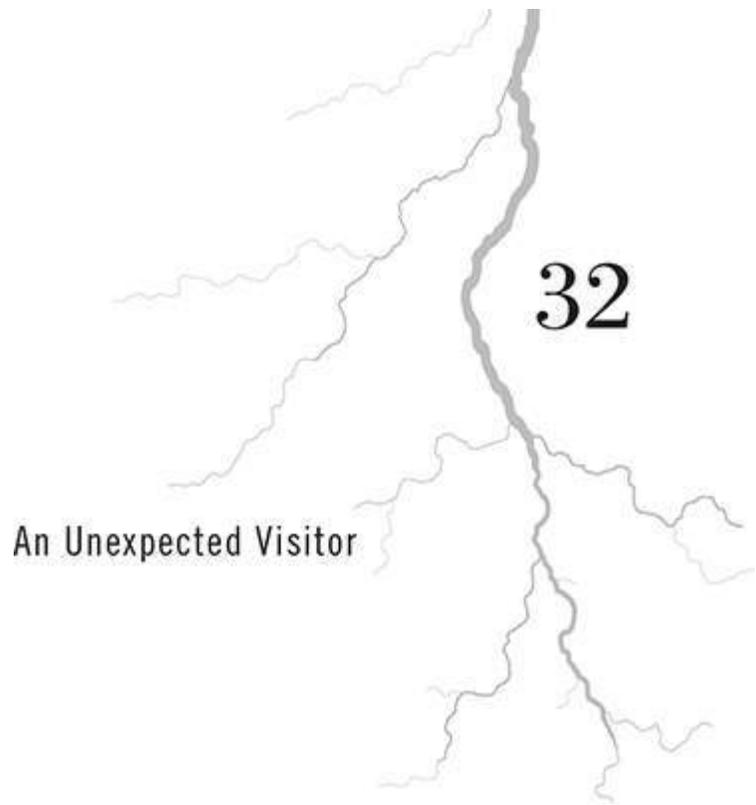
Taylor was writhing in pain. “Tell them to stop.”

“Yeah, I’m going to do that,” she said. “I can’t believe we came from the same egg.” She crouched down next to her. “They *will* feed you to the rats. I’ve seen them do it. So you’d better grow a brain and get them the information they want.” She walked to the door. “I told you, Sis. You can’t win.”

She walked out of the cell, leaving Taylor screaming in pain.



PART NINE



It may have been pain altering my perception, but passing through the four Elgen checkpoints into the Starsource compound seemed to take even longer than the drive from Kaohsiung.

Ostin had stopped talking long before we reached the first gate. Probably before we had even left Kaohsiung. I was afraid for him. I wasn't sure how much more he could take. I wasn't sure how much more I could take either.

When the van finally reached the inside of the plant, the back doors were unlocked and they swung open. Through my blurred vision I could see three Elgen guards waiting to take us. One of them climbed inside and unlatched my restraints. I fell to the van's floor, unable to move. The RESAT had drained all of my power.

Then six of the Lung Li appeared. One of them grabbed me by the leg, his powerful hand digging into my calf as he dragged me to the edge of the van while the others huddled around me, like demons. They wore black-mirrored goggles, but I was close enough to them to see through the lenses to the darkness of their eyes.

Four of the Lung Li lifted me and carried me to a stainless-steel gurney and strapped me down. I had seen these gurneys before. I had been strapped to one at the Peruvian plant just before Hatch had tried to feed me to the rats.

With the Lung Li surrounding me, they began to roll me away. I tried to lift my head to see what they were doing to Ostin but couldn't. Then I passed out.

* * *

I don't know how long I was unconscious. I thought it was ten or fifteen minutes, but it could just as easily have been hours. Or days, for that matter. My mind was spinning and I had no grasp of time. I didn't know where I was other than that I was in a strange place—a small, dark room with symbols on the wall; some looked like Chinese characters and others looked like ancient runes or the markings of alchemists. The room was lit by flickering candles that glowed red and smelled of incense. There was no sound except the repetitious, peaceful dripping of water. Oddly, the place had a calming effect.

I was still strapped down but not to the metal gurney. I was on some type of hard leather pad. The RESAT was gone. When I lifted my head I saw that I had no shirt or shoes and I was wearing peculiar tight black pants made of a thin, cottonlike material—almost like long johns—except they only came down to my knees.

I was held fast by thick leather straps at my wrists, waist, chest, arms, thighs, and ankles. I tried to pull against them, but it was like lifting an elephant. I'm certain each of the straps could have supported more than a ton. My body ached. My insides felt bruised or burned, damaged from the RESAT.

Then I realized there was a man sitting quietly next to me. He wore the Lung Li uniform with the dragon head patch. He had no helmet or goggles and his eyes were locked on to mine with an intense stare. His expression was emotionless, neither sympathetic nor cruel.

“You are back, Michael,” he said with a thick Asian accent. “I am pleased you are back. Now we can get to work.” He reached over and pulled a metal cart next to me. I could hear the squeaking of the cart's wheels, but I could not see what was on it.

“We don’t know where acupuncture began. But it is ancient. Very ancient. Much older than Western medicine—even older than your gods. There are records of it being used for more than three thousand years. Some attribute it to Shennong, the emperor of the five grains. But that sounds like superstition. Unlike many of my order, I am not a superstitious man. I am a man of science.

“A more reasonable explanation is that the Chinese doctors of the Han dynasty observed that soldiers wounded by arrows were sometimes cured of illnesses.

“I do not know why acupuncture was never accepted in Western culture. Maybe they were afraid of the unfamiliar.” He lifted something from the cart and held it above me so I could see it. It was a simple steel needle about six inches long. I closed my eyes.

“Yes, you prove my point,” he said. “You Westerners are squeamish about needles. You act as if this fascinating art were barbaric. It’s not. Acupuncture isn’t about pain. In truth, if done properly, most patients report feeling a pleasurable sensation.” He moved his face closer to mine and looked into my eyes. “*Most*. But that would not be true for you. You see, acupuncture is about directing the electricity in your body. But where there is an abnormal amount of electricity, it tends to cause pain. Sometimes great pain.

“We have observed that you have more electricity than the others, so your pain might be especially exquisite.” He held the needle a few inches above my chest. “There are three hundred and sixty acupuncture points. This one is called the *Wuyi*.” With a slight twisting motion he inserted the needle about an inch into my skin. Immediately, electricity shot through my body toward the needle. I yelled out.

“Yes, you see, I was right.” He lifted another needle from the tray. “Now, if we place a needle here, it will create a circuit between the two points.” He poked another needle into the skin between my neck and clavicle. It felt as if a live high-voltage electric wire had been inserted through my body. I screamed. “Stop!”

The man seemed intrigued by my reaction. “The challenge is to keep the pain as high as possible while still keeping you conscious.”

“Please, stop,” I cried.

“We are only beginning,” he said clinically. He inserted another needle near my groin. The electricity created a triangular current that contracted

my stomach muscles. Involuntarily my body heaved forward as if I were trying to do a sit-up, but the leather restraints held me down. I felt as if I was going to vomit. Sweat streamed down the sides of my face, and already my hair and skin were completely drenched. My eyes felt locked shut.

“*Hen you yisz,*” he said. “Very interesting.”

I forced my eyes open as he lifted another needle. His eyes scanned my body like it was a map and he was searching for a destination.

“What do you want from me?” I cried.

His eyes settled on mine in a curious gaze. “Nothing. What would I want from you?”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“I told you, I am a man of science. For thousands of years we have believed there were three hundred and sixty acupuncture points. I believe the number is closer to five hundred. With your hypersensitivity to the needles, I believe, together, we can find them all.”

The thought of hundreds of more needles stuck into me paralyzed me with fear. “That will kill me,” I said.

The man was quiet for a moment, then said, “That is a possibility.” He breathed out slowly. “But there is a cost for all knowledge.”

He looked back at my body. “Now, we continue. If I place a needle here ...”

I shut my eyes as I felt the cold tip of the needle against my neck. He began to slide it into my skin when someone shouted, “Stop!”

“Sir ...”

“Take those out, now! Or I’ll have you fed to the rats.”

“Yes, sir.”

He immediately pulled the needles out. The pain stopped.

“Now get out of here. *Ma shang, ba!*”

“*Bau chyan,*” the man said. “*Bau chyan.*”

I could hear him running from the room, his soft footfalls echoing down the corridor. There was a moment of silence; then whoever had entered the room sat down next to me. “Barbarian,” he grumbled. I was still too weak to open my eyes. I could feel a dry cloth being dabbed on my head and face. “I’m sorry, Michael. I had no idea they were doing this to you. Trust me, they will pay for this atrocity.”

The voice sounded oddly familiar. I forced my eyes open. Though my vision was blurry I could make out the visage of a man, not too old, maybe

a few years younger than my mother. His hair was light brown, almost the same color as mine, and he had thick eyebrows.

When I could speak I said, "Who are you?"

He didn't answer but continued to wipe the sweat from my neck and face. Then he said, "Are you sure you don't know who I am?"

"No."

"I know your vision must still be blurry, but look more carefully."

As my vision cleared I could make out the details of his face. He looked so familiar. Then I remembered. I knew who he was.

"No," I said. "I'm hallucinating."

"It must seem ... odd," he said. He ticked, his face contracting in a grimace. "Or maybe impossible. But I am who you think I am."

My eyes welled up with tears, but this time not from pain. "Dad?"



“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you,” my father said as he unlatched the straps that held me down. I slowly rubbed my wrists, then tried to sit up.

“Not too fast,” he said. “I’m sure you’re still dizzy. Is the ice helping?” My father had set ice packs where the needles had been used.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“You must be thirsty. Let me get you some water.” He reached down and brought up a plastic bottle. I drained the whole thing.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” One of his eyes twitched and he gulped like I sometimes did. “How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know. Confused.”

“I’m not surprised, after what they’ve done to you. You’ll feel better in a few hours.”

“I mean about you,” I said.

He hesitated a moment, then said, “I understand.”

“How are you ...” I couldn’t think of the right word.

“Alive?” he said. “It’s simple. I never died.”

“But I went to your funeral. I remember it.”

“How was that?” he said, sounding slightly amused. “I would have liked to have been there. I even considered going in disguise, but it was too risky.”

I didn’t find what he was telling me amusing. “Was Mom in on this?”

He was quiet a moment; then his voice softened. “No. She believes I’m dead.”

“But you had a death certificate. I saw it.”

“That’s not hard to get when you work at a hospital.”

Suddenly anger welled up inside of me. “I cried every day for a year. How could you do this to us?”

“Not *to*,” he said calmly. “*For*. It’s a big difference. And I had my reasons. After we discovered that the MEI had malfunctioned, we had reason to fear for our lives. Not just mine and James Hatch’s, but yours and your mother’s as well.

“We were working with unsavory people, like Giacomo Schema, who had lost hundreds of millions of dollars. We had board members who could potentially lose millions of dollars more in lawsuits. You have to understand that these were ruthless men and women who were willing to kill not only my colleagues and me but even my wife and newborn child. In fact, they openly threatened me that if the deaths the MEI caused were discovered, they would take you from me. That, I couldn’t risk. So James Hatch and I —”

“Hatch is a demon,” I blurted out. “He tried to kill me.”

My father seemed disturbed by my outburst. “No, he just pretended to, or you wouldn’t still be alive.” He let the words settle. “Michael, sometimes things aren’t as they seem. James Hatch did what he had to do. He pled with the board not to use the MEI until it could be safely tested. We both did. So did Dr. Coonradt. But they wouldn’t listen. They forced us to use the machine before it was ready.

“The MEI could have saved millions of lives a year. It would have allowed us to detect and treat cancer months, even years, before it was a threat. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. The three of us doctors—Hatch, Coonradt, and I—were certain that we could make the MEI work if we had the time. But the Elgen board wouldn’t wait. And when things went wrong, they blamed us for doing what they forced us to.”

He took a deep breath. “I could have resigned. I should have. But hindsight is always twenty-twenty. I was young and employed in a good job. Your mother’s and my dreams were coming true. Your mother was pregnant and we were about to start our family. It wasn’t the time to quit my job—especially when there was a chance that the MEI might have worked.

“Had I known what the machine would do, I would have quit. But there was no way of knowing.” He breathed out slowly. “The weight of that decision has been crushing. You might say that I was one of the lucky ones, because you could have been one of those babies killed. But I had to lose you just like those other parents did.” His eyes welled up. “But now that we’ve stopped Schema and his jackals, it doesn’t matter. No one can take you or my wife away from me. That’s why we came looking for you. Not because you’re electric, but because you’re my son and I couldn’t bear not having you.”

“Hatch told me I killed you.”

“I wasn’t happy about that. But he said what he thought he needed to in order to protect us. And you.”

“What about Mom? Why would Hatch kidnap her?”

My father frowned, then his jaw began ticking. “Things got a little out of hand,” he said.

“A little?”

“A lot.” He put his hand on my arm. “Michael, never forget that what I did, I did for you and your mother. I sacrificed everything I knew and loved to protect the ones I loved most.”

We looked at each other for a moment; then my father said, “Oh, before I forget.” He held up my watch. I hadn’t seen it since I’d been captured in Peru by Hatch. “I thought you’d want this back.”

I took it from him. I looked at it for a moment, then handed it back. “You should keep it. It’s yours.”

My father seemed a little taken aback. “No, I want you to have it.”

I put it on my wrist, which was still red and indented from the leather strap I’d been tied down with. “It got kind of beaten up,” I said.

“Like you?”

“Yeah,” I said.

We were quiet for a moment. As I looked at him, he ticked a few more times.

“You have Tourette’s too?” I asked.

He nodded. "You know it's genetic. You had to suspect that I had it, since your mother doesn't."

"I never thought about it."

"I'm sorry I gave that to you." He lightly grinned. "But I also gave you your good looks. You've got to take the bad with the good."

"I think Mom helped."

"Helped," he said, laughing. "She was ninety-nine percent of your good looks."

As I looked at him I suddenly broke down crying. My father looked at me for a moment, then he put his arms around me and held me. I wept for a long time before we parted. When I could speak I asked, "Now what?"

He shook his head. "Things have gotten a little ... sorry, *a lot* out of hand. Now this whole crazy resistance thing has started... ."

"They said *you* started it."

He looked at me. "Why would I start a resistance against myself? Who told you that?"

"Simon."

"Simon? I don't know any Simon."

"He said he worked with you."

He looked down to think. "Right. It's been a long time, but I think I know who it is. Simon Kay. He worked at the hospital." He looked back at me. "It's time we rescued your mother. Now that we've taken back our company from Schema, we can all be together again. We can fulfill the dream that started all of this, and save millions of lives."

My eyes filled with tears again. "I've done such bad things."

"You can't blame yourself, Son. You're only fifteen. You've done what you were told to do by Simon."

"It wasn't Simon," I said. "It was the voice."

He looked at me quizzically "What's the voice?"

"I don't know. It's just a voice that talks to us."

He looked at me quizzically then said, "We need to save your mother before they hurt her. Where is she?"

I didn't answer.

"I appreciate your hesitation," he said. "You're trying to protect her. So am I. That's why I need to know where she is."

"She's at a ranch."

"Where?"

“I don’t know. They wouldn’t tell us, in case we were captured.”

“Do you remember any details?”

“My friend Ostin figured that we were around Texas or Mexico. It was a three-hour flight to Los Angeles.”

“Exactly three hours?”

“Maybe a little less. Like two hours and forty-five minutes.”

“When were you there?”

“Like, eight days ago.”

“Exactly eight days?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember the weather? Was it cloudy or raining?”

“It was pretty warm. I remember someone saying it had gotten up to ninety-seven degrees.”

“Ninety-seven,” he said. “Thank you, Son. This will definitely help. We’ve got to save her before they find out you finally know the truth.”

“What truth?”

“That the Elgen are the good guys.”



That night I couldn't sleep. The room they gave me was locked, which my father apologized for. "Corporate protocol," he called it. He explained that since the plant was a federal facility and a national security risk there were federal regulations that not even he or Hatch could waive. "Stupid bureaucrats," he grumbled, shaking his head. "Every country has them. Until you are certified as a non-security risk you cannot have free access to the plant."

From a comfort level, my room was nice. It had a cupboard stocked with snacks and a small refrigerator with all kinds of drinks, both Chinese and American. There was a television with a library of DVDs, and the bed was soft with fresh-smelling silk sheets. But comfortable or not, it was still a prison, and I knew that I was being watched. In one corner of the room there was the constant blinking of a camera's red LED.

I asked my father where Taylor and the others were. He assured me that they were being kept in rooms as nice as mine, but when I asked to see them he apologized again and said he would have to get approval, which might take a few days. I couldn't understand why seeing my friends would

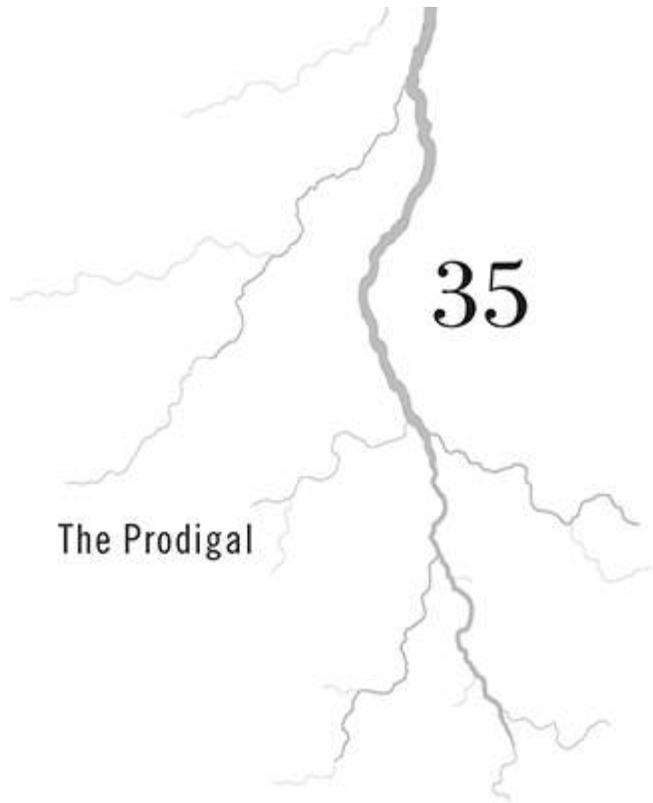
pose a national security risk, but he just said, “I know it sounds ridiculous. Trust me, it is. But that’s Chinese bureaucracy for you.”

In spite of my father’s assurances, I still had an ocean of questions. Hatch had fired a gun at me at the academy. He certainly wasn’t faking that bullet that Zeus had shot out of the air. Or what about when he tried to feed me to the rats? It wasn’t adding up. Maybe my father had been deceived. Maybe Hatch wasn’t really who my father thought he was.

Soft as my bed was, I tossed and turned for several hours. In the middle of the night I heard a key in my door. I looked over as my heart pounded wildly. *Who would be coming into my room at this hour?* Maybe my father was breaking the rules after all. As the door slowly opened I noticed that the light on the surveillance camera went out.

“Michael.”

Contrasted against the radiance from the corridor’s dim lighting, I could see the partial silhouette of a form standing in the doorway. When my eyes adjusted I couldn’t believe who it was. It was the only Glow who didn’t glow.



“Nichelle,” I growled. I stood, balling my hands into fists. “What are you doing here?”

“We’ve got to go. We don’t have much time before they realize your camera’s out.”

I grabbed her by her neck and threw her up against the wall. “I should fry you right now, you traitor.”

“I didn’t betray you,” she said. “Things aren’t what they seem.”

“You think I’m that stupid?”

Nichelle grimaced with pain. “If I betrayed you, why am I here?”

“No idea,” I said, my electricity sparking with my anger. “But I know you led the Elgen to us.”

“I only pretended to. The Elgen had already found us. That night at the street market ... that wasn’t Taylor who came back with us.”

I remembered what Ostin had said in the back of the van. “What?”

“I can smell different electricity,” she said. “It was Tara who came out of the store. That’s why I was acting strange. And that’s why she wanted to

leave so fast. They must have captured Taylor when she went into that store.”

Her explanation flustered me. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because I’m telling the truth! Remember how different Taylor was acting? How she suddenly had a headache?”

I just glared at her.

“Michael, you have to believe me or we’ll all die.”

“I *don’t* believe you.”

“Remember, Tara’s blouse was unbuttoned? She must have traded clothes with Taylor so we wouldn’t know.”

“Why didn’t you tell us then? We could have held Tara hostage.”

“Because they would have just killed Taylor *and* us. You couldn’t have held Tara hostage. Hatch doesn’t care what happens to any of us. I know that better than anyone.”

I just looked at her.

“Please, Michael. I’m not lying. I know you think I’m evil and worthless, but right now, at this moment, I’m not lying. And if we don’t hurry the Lung Li are going to kill the real Taylor. They’re going to feed her to the rats.” Then Nichelle did something I’d never seen her do before. Her eyes welled up with tears. “You’ve got to believe me. If not for us, then for Taylor’s sake.”

I slowly relaxed my grip on her. “How do you know they’re going to feed her to the rats?”

Nichelle slid back against the wall, clutching her throat. “I heard the guards talking about it. The Elgen feed people to rats.”

I knew this better than anyone. The memory of my time in the bowl filled my mind with terror. “Why did you lead the Elgen to us?”

“It was our only chance. They already knew where we were, and they’d already captured Taylor. I had to make Hatch believe that I was betraying you.”

Everything she said made sense except for one thing. “You could have just run away. Why didn’t you?”

“I know,” she said softly. “I almost did.” She looked me in the eyes. “But I didn’t, okay? I promised I’d help you.”

I didn’t know what to say.

She breathed out in exasperation. “We’ve already wasted too much time. We need to go. *Now.*”

“Where are we going?”

She took a piece of paper out of her pocket and unfolded it. “We need some light,” she said.

I held my hand close enough to the paper that my glow illuminated it.

“I drew this map. I think it’s pretty accurate.” She pointed to a square she’d drawn. “We’re right here. The Lung Li are stationed where I put the *L*s. The regular guards are where I put the *X*s. If we can get into the air duct through the mechanical closet across the hall, I think we can crawl through the duct out to here.” She touched the other end of her map. “That’s the hallway where they’re holding everyone except Taylor. We’ll need Ian to find her. She’s probably being held somewhere near the bowl.”

“Do you have keys to the other rooms?”

“No, I could only get this one. But you have more electricity than Bryan. I think if you focus, you could burn through the bars.”

I didn’t know if I could or not, but at this point I didn’t have much of a choice. “All right, let’s go.”

Nichelle slowly opened the door, then stopped. “The camera is sweeping our way,” she said. “Come closer. When I say ‘go’ we’ll run to the closet across the hall.”

I stepped in close behind her.

“Ready ... Go.”

We stole across the hall to a mechanical closet and quickly ducked in, shutting the door behind us.

“There should be an air vent in the ceiling,” Nichelle said.

My glow wasn’t bright enough to illuminate the ceiling, so I created a small lightning ball, which lit the closet. “Right there,” I said, looking up. The vent cover was mounted with screws. “It’s screwed in.”

“I got this,” Nichelle said, holding up a screwdriver.

I looked at the vent, then back at the tool. “It’s the wrong kind of screwdriver.”

“It’s all I could find.”

“Maybe we can pry it off,” I said. “Give me the screwdriver.”

She handed it to me.

“Now help me up.”

I climbed up a pipe while Nichelle pushed against me. I slid the flat tip of the screwdriver under the vent cover and pulled on it but couldn’t pry it loose.

Suddenly we could see the light under the closet door brighten.

“They must know you’ve escaped,” Nichelle said. “This is our only way out. Focus your electricity in your fingertip and melt the heads off the screws.”

I had never tried melting anything before. I held up my index finger and concentrated on it. It began to glow brighter and brighter until it was bright enough to light up the room. It was fortunate that they had turned on the hall lights when they did, otherwise they would have seen my light from under the door. I touched my finger to one of the tops of the screws. It took just a few seconds before the head turned bright red, then melted. “It worked,” I said, starting on the next.

“Hurry,” she said. “I can’t hold you much longer.”

There were four screws. I melted them all, then slid the vent cover out of its brackets and handed it down to Nichelle before climbing back down. “I’ll help you up first,” I said.

I crouched down to my haunches. Nichelle climbed up onto my back, then shoulders. She didn’t weigh very much, and I stood so she could get her elbows into the open vent. She pulled herself up into the duct. We could hear footsteps walking toward us.

“Hurry,” she whispered.

I handed her the vent cover, then climbed up the pipe and pulled myself into the duct. “Quick, give me the vent cover,” I said. “I need to cover this back up.” She handed it to me. As I reached out to slide it into its frame it slipped from my fingers. I clenched my teeth as it hit against the pipe, then the floor with a loud clang.

I glanced back. Nichelle’s eyes were wide with fear.

“Maybe they didn’t hear it,” I whispered.

Suddenly there were footsteps approaching the door. If they saw the open vent we were as good as dead.

As the door handle moved, I reached down toward the cover and magnetized. It flew up to my hand. As the door opened I maneuvered the cover into place, then backed my hand off magnetically, holding it over the opening.

Someone stepped inside the closet. He coughed, and then there was nothing, which was more unnerving than his noise. I didn’t dare look through the vent but I listened carefully for the unholstering of his pistol. It would be easy for him to shoot us through the tin ductwork. The beam of a

flashlight shone through the cover to the top of the vent. The guard hesitated just a moment more; then he walked out of the closet and shut the door. We waited a moment longer; then, still magnetically holding the vent cover with one hand, I reached out and grabbed it with my other hand and slid it into place. "Let's go," I whispered.

The duct we were crawling through was as large as the one in Peru, about thirty inches high and three feet wide, and pitch black except for my glow. We crawled on our elbows and knees as fast as we could.

The air duct passed by both Ostin's and Jack's rooms. We came to Ostin's first. The vent covering in his room wasn't an ordinary screen but made of the same reinforced steel bars that were on the room's windows.

"How are we going to get through *that*?" I said.

"Just like you did with those screws," Nichelle replied. "You can melt through it. Just focus."

Nichelle made the room's surveillance camera go dark; then I heated up, focusing all my energy into my right palm. As the light from my hand grew brighter, Ostin woke. He curiously sat up in bed, watching. "Michael?"

I burned through two of the bars, leaving a space big enough for him to fit through.

He stood. "Michael? Is that you?"

"Yes," I said. "Drag your bed over and climb up."

He pushed his bed over to the vent, leaving one end of it propped up against the door to slow the guards if they entered. I reached down and grabbed his hand and pulled him in to his waist. He climbed the rest of the way in. It wasn't until after he was completely inside the duct that he saw Nichelle.

"What's she doing here?"

"She's helping us escape."

"She's the one who got us captured."

"It's not her fault. Remember what you said about Taylor not being Taylor?"

"Yeah."

"You were right. That was Tara who came back to the hotel with us."

"I knew it," he said. "And Nichelle knew it was Tara, so she went to Hatch and turned us in so he'd think she was on his side."

Nichelle looked at him in amazement. "That's exactly what I did."

"Brilliant," he said.

I suppose that was one of the benefits of being friends with Ostin. You didn't always have to explain things. We made our way to the next vent, which was Jack's room. Jack was lying in his bed, facing away from us. Nichelle killed the camera; then I whispered, "Jack."

He didn't move.

"Jack!" I said louder.

Still nothing.

"He must be asleep," Ostin said.

I melted through the bars and let myself down into the room. As I neared I saw that he was tied up in a white canvas straitjacket. I gently shook him. "Jack, it's me."

He slowly rolled over. "Michael?"

I was horrified. From my glow I could see that the Elgen guards had severely beaten him. Both of his eyes were swollen and he had a huge contusion under his left eye. "I'm so sorry, buddy," I said.

The jacket he was tied up in was fastened with simple buckles.

"Roll onto your stomach," I said. "I'll get this thing off."

Jack groaned with pain as he rolled over. I quickly released the buckles, then Jack took off the jacket and slowly stretched out his arms, grimacing with the movement.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I think they broke my ribs," he said.

"I wish Abi was here to help you."

"I'm glad she's not," he said.

We pushed his bed to the wall beneath the vent.

"Can you lift yourself up?" I asked.

"I'll try."

Jack stood on the bed and grabbed ahold of the vent's outer bars but, probably for the first time in his life, struggled to do a single pull-up. "I can't do it."

"Yes, you can." I got down on all fours. "Step up on my back."

He looked at me doubtfully but did as I said. He weighed more than I thought he did, but now that he was two feet closer he was able to pull himself the rest of the way up. It was not until I began to climb back up myself that I realized I had forgotten to tell him about Nichelle. I heard his voice echo from the vent. "You!"

Fortunately Ostin was positioned between Jack and Nichelle.

“Take it easy,” Nichelle said.

“I’m going to rip your head off, you—”

“Jack, stop,” I said, pulling my upper body into the duct. “She’s on our side.”

“You can beat me up later,” Nichelle said dully. “But now’s not really the time.”

I pulled myself the rest of the way in.

“Jack, she’s cool,” Ostin said.

“Have you guys lost your minds?”

“Trust me,” I said. “Things aren’t the way we thought they were.”

“Here,” Nichelle said, handing Jack the screwdriver. “You can use this as a weapon.” He looked surprised at the offer, but reached out and took it.

“Just don’t kill me with it,” she said, turning back around.

“How much time do we have?” I asked Nichelle.

“About an hour.”

“We need to go faster,” I said.

“What’s going on?” Jack asked.

“They’re going to put Taylor in the bowl,” I said. “We need to get Ian and McKenna, then go for her.”

“Taylor was with McKenna,” Jack said.

“No, she wasn’t,” Ostin said.

We crawled farther down the duct, though Jack did so with great difficulty. Crawling on his stomach with broken ribs was like walking barefoot on broken glass.

Five minutes later Nichelle said, “There’s a Glow coming up. I can feel him. I think it’s Ian.”

“Let me get in front,” I said. I crawled past everyone. As I approached the opening, I heard someone shouting. I looked through the vent. Ian was sitting on his bed yelling at the two guards in the room with him. It took me a second to figure out why—he must have seen us coming and was keeping the guards from looking at us. As I peered out of the vent, Ian glanced up at me for a millisecond, then, turning away, slowly shook his head.

“Two guards,” I whispered to the others. Normally I could take them, but I couldn’t pulse that far and I couldn’t throw an electric ball through the bars. I wished Zeus were with us. They’d already be on the ground.

“We’re going to have to go in through the hall,” I said. “We need to back up.”

We had crawled over a mechanical closet about sixty feet back and we crawled backward until we reached the vent. I lit a single finger and pushed it through the metal, then dragged it around the edges until I'd cut through three sides.

"You're getting good at that," Nichelle said.

"Thanks." I bent the grate back with my foot.

There wasn't enough room in the closet for all of us, so only Nichelle and I climbed down. Nichelle put her ear against the door. I looked at her in anticipation. "Anything?"

She shook her head. "I'm going to look out. Be ready." She slowly turned the doorknob and opened the door just enough to look down the hall. Then she raised her hand and turned off all the cameras and stepped out.

"You there! What are you doing?" someone shouted.

"What do I do?" Nichelle asked without looking back. "It's a guard."

"Try to get him close," I said.

"Put your hands up," the guard said.

Nichelle laughed. "In your dreams."

"I said put them up. Now!"

"Since when do Eagles take orders from captains?"

There was a pause; then he said, "I'm sorry, miss. I didn't realize it was you."

"No worries," she said. "I knew it was *you*."

"What are you doing here?" He was coming closer.

She lowered her voice. "Looking for you, Captain."

"May I help you with something?"

"I was just hoping to get to know you a little better."

The man seemed rattled. "You know, it's against the Elgen code to—"

Nichelle interrupted him. "Do you always follow the code?"

"Not always," he said softly. He was getting close.

"Good. Because that code could definitely get in the way, if you know what I mean."

There was a pause.

"What time is your shift over, handsome?"

"I'm done at—"

Nichelle raised her hand. "Wait, did you hear that?"

"What?"

“Hatch is looking for me. If he finds me with you, who knows what he’ll think.” She reached out her hand. “Hurry. In the closet.”

“But ...”

“Hurry!”

The captain ducked inside the closet, and Nichelle pulled the door shut behind them. I was crouched on the opposite side of a heating unit just a few feet from the guard. He was facing the opposite direction, so he didn’t see my glow.

It was quiet for a moment; then the captain said, “I didn’t hear anything.”

“I thought I saw Michael Vey.”

“Vey?”

“You’ve heard of him?”

“Of course I’ve heard of him.”

“Have you ever met him?”

“I really shouldn’t be in here.”

“That’s for sure,” I said.

“What?” As he swung back, I put my hand on his leg and pulsed. He dropped to the ground.

“You’re good,” I said to Nichelle. “You could be an actress.”

“I lived with Hatch for ten years. I was.” She looked down at the guard. “Let’s get his keys.”

Ostin stuck his head through the open vent. “Hey, he’s about Jack’s size. He could wear his uniform.”

“Good idea,” I said. It wasn’t easy undressing the guard in the closet, but we got his clothes off and handed them up to Jack. Then we handcuffed the guard to a pipe with his hands behind his back and stuffed his T-shirt in his mouth to keep him from shouting for help. I helped Ostin down from the vent, then Jack climbed down by himself, even though he was still in a lot of pain. We gave Jack the guard’s keys.

“What’s the plan?” Jack asked.

“You’ve got the uniform, Captain,” I said. “Ian is in the second door on the left. There should still be two guards in there. Get them to the door and I’ll take care of them.”

“Got it,” Jack said.

Jack stepped out of the closet and looked around. “All clear,” he said.

The four of us walked to the room. Jack looked in through the one-way window, then unlocked the door. Nichelle, Ostin, and I pressed up behind

him. We could hear the guards yelling at Ian.

Jack glanced back at us and pushed open the door. “What’s going on?” Jack said to the guards. “What’s all this shouting?”

“Captain,” one of the guards replied. “We were questioning the prisoner.”

“We don’t have time for that. There’s been a breach of security. Two of the prisoners have escaped. We’ve been ordered to lock down our hall and join the hunt. Come with me.”

“Yes, sir,” two voices said in unison.

As they got to the door, I stepped in around Jack and pulsed, knocking them both back into the room. Nichelle knocked out the camera while I released Ian.

“That was some trick getting in here,” Ian said.

“You watched the whole thing?” I asked.

“From the second Nichelle walked into your room.” He looked at Nichelle. “You can explain later.”

“Happy to,” she replied.

“Where’s McKenna?” Ostin asked.

“Just two cells down from this one. No guards with her.”

“We’ll grab her on the way. Have you seen Taylor?”

“They’ve got her locked up in a cell by the bowl. She’s with the girl.”

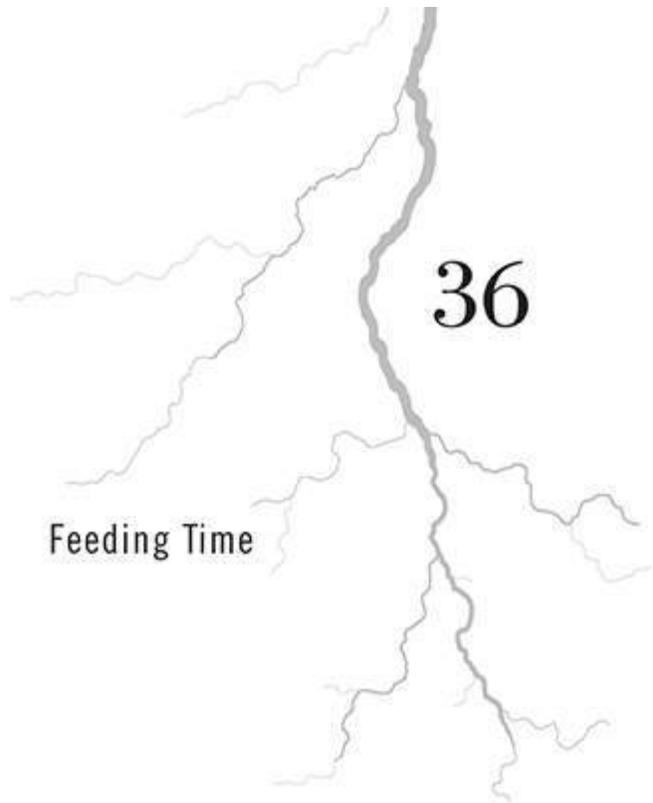
“Jade Dragon?”

He nodded. “Yes. And we’d better hurry. The guards are on their way to get her. It looks like it’s feeding time in the bowl.”

“Come on, Taylor,” I said. “You just need to buy us some time.”



PART TEN



Taylor and Jade Dragon were still awake, huddled in one corner of the cell as the door opened. The same three guards from before walked in accompanied by two Lung Li.

“It’s feeding time, sweetie,” the captain said. “Do you have the information?”

“It’s about time you got here,” Taylor said.

The captain looked at her dully. “What?”

“I’m not Taylor, Captain. I’m Tara. I came down to see if I could persuade Taylor to help us and she did something to me. She’s out there pretending to be me.”

“And I’m Admiral Hatch,” the captain said.

The other two guards laughed. The Lung Li stood motionless.

“Take the child,” the captain said.

The two Lung Li grabbed Jade Dragon. She started screaming.

“Leave her alone!” Taylor shouted. “You’re hurting her!”

“Take her,” the captain repeated.

One of the Lung Li shoved a needle into the child's thigh and she immediately slumped over. The other guard slung her over his shoulder, then the two Lung Li took her out.

"Now for you," the captain said.

"I'm not Taylor!" Taylor screamed. "Just look at me!"

"I just saw Tara," the captain said. He leaned close. "Do you have our information?"

"I told you, I'm Tara!"

The captain's eyes narrowed to angry slits. "You're playing with your life."

"And you're playing with yours," Taylor said.

"Enough of this," the captain growled. "Take her."

Taylor pressed back against the wall. "I can prove I'm Tara. If you touch me, you'll pay."

The guards hesitated. Disobeying one of "Hatch's kids" was like disrespecting an EGG. Or worse.

"Don't listen to her," the captain ordered.

Taylor looked up at the camera. "Dr. Hatch, they're going to kill the wrong girl. Taylor switched places with me. I can prove it and this fool of a captain won't listen." She turned to the captain. "We both know they record everything. If something happens to me, Dr. Hatch will feed you to the rats next. I guarantee it."

This time the captain hesitated.

"Just give me five minutes to prove who I am. Your life is worth at least five minutes, isn't it?"

"How will you prove it?"

"Get Quentin and Taylor. Q will know the difference between the two of us. He can verify who I am."

The captain looked at her for a moment, then turned to the guard on his left. "Get Quentin. And Tara. Bring them both. Hurry. We have a feeding schedule."

* * *

Five minutes later Quentin stormed into the cell, with Tara and the guard following behind him. It was clear he'd been woken up. "What is it?" Quentin asked angrily.

"This girl claims to be Tara."

“You interrupted my sleep for that?” Quentin snarled.

“She says she can prove it and that you would know.”

Quentin looked at her. “What do you want, *Taylor*?”

“I’m not Taylor,” Taylor said. “Taylor is standing next to you.”

“Oh, please,” Tara said. “That’s just lame. You really are desperate.”

“Quentin, ask her something only *we* would know,” Taylor said. “Like what we had for dinner at the mall. You know, before we came to Taiwan.”

Quentin suddenly looked confused.

“Just ask her,” Taylor said.

He turned to Tara. “How did she know about the mall?”

Tara looked confused. “I don’t know.”

“What did we have for dinner?”

Tara paled. “Oh, come on, you’re not really going to play her game. You know me.”

“You didn’t answer,” Taylor said. “So what was it? What did you have for dinner? Easy question.”

Tara looked panicked. “I ... I had ... we had ...”

Taylor lifted one eyebrow. “Yes?”

“I’m not doing this,” Tara answered.

“It’s a simple question,” Quentin said. After a moment he pressed her. “Well?”

“I ... I don’t remember.”

“Really?” Taylor said. “Because I remember that the calzone we all had was pretty good for a food court. And the capellini that Q ordered on the side was just as good.” Taylor looked at Quentin. “Ask her what ‘calzone’ means.”

He looked at her. “What does ‘calzone’ mean?”

Again Tara couldn’t recall. “C’mon, this is a trick. She’s doing something to me.”

“Yes, it is a trick,” Quentin said. He turned to the guards. “Take her.” They grabbed Tara.

“Quentin! Stop it!”

Taylor breathed out in relief. “Finally.”

Quentin stepped up to her. “How did this happen?”

“I went to visit her alone to see if I could talk some sense into her. But apparently she’s learned some new trick. The next thing I remembered I was lying on the ground next to the little girl.”

“She’s lying!” Tara shouted.

“That was stupid to come alone,” Quentin said. “Don’t do it again.”

“Believe me, I won’t. I thought I could save us some time. I thought you’d be proud of me.”

“I am proud of you.” Quentin turned to the guards. “Take her to the bowl. You’re already late for feeding time.”

Tara turned white. “Quentin, I’m Tara!”

“Yeah, and I’m Michael Vey.”

The guards began dragging Tara away. Tara screamed. “No! Stop! Stop!”

“She was right about one thing,” Taylor said. “That was lame.”

“You have to be careful,” Quentin said. “These Electrodorks are clever little monkeys.” He put his arm around her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. For almost dying.”

“That was too close,” he said. He went to kiss her when, from down the hall, Tara shouted, “Quentin, my tattoo. Look at my tattoo.”

He stopped.

“My tattoo!” she shouted again.

“Hold up,” Quentin said to the guards. He looked at Taylor. “Show me your tattoo.”

“You just want to see my ballerina,” she said coyly.

He didn’t smile. “Yes, I do.”

Taylor forced a smile. “I’ll show you later. In private.” She rebooted him. “Shall we go?”

Quentin blinked a few times, then said, “Of course. I’m tired.”

They started to walk away when the captain said, “Sir, did you want to check the tattoo?”

“My tattoo!” Tara shouted. “You’re the one who chose it. Look at my tattoo.”

Quentin looked at Taylor uneasily; then he walked over and pulled the collar of Tara’s blouse down over her shoulder, revealing a tattoo of a ballerina.

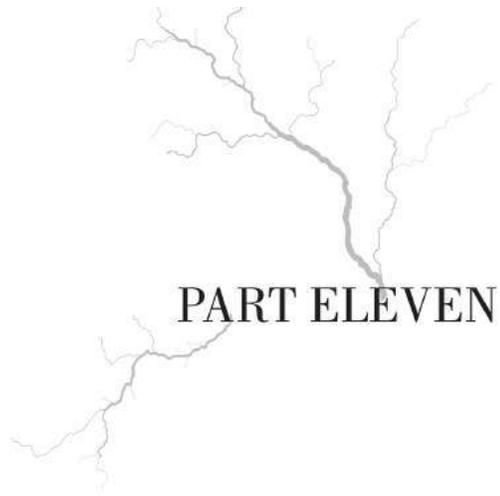
“It’s me,” Tara sobbed. “I’m Tara.”

He turned back to Taylor. “Show me your tattoo.”

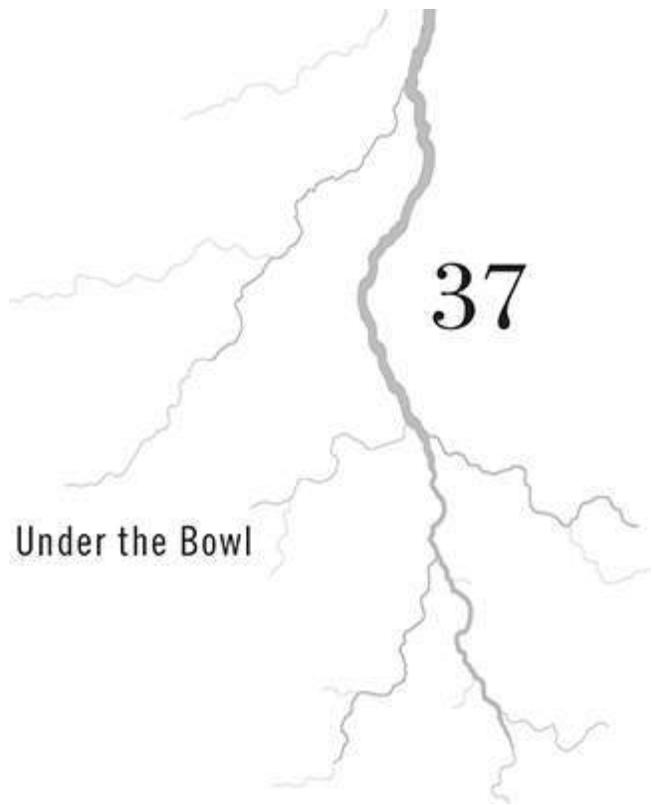
Taylor folded her arms at her chest and grinned. “Like you said, we *Electrodorks* are clever little monkeys.”

Just then there was a blast of electricity and all three guards hit the floor. Then Tara and Quentin fell to the ground, doubled over in pain.

Taylor looked at Michael and smiled. “It’s about time you got here.”



PART ELEVEN



I could tell we were near the bowl because I was feeling more electric. Sparks snapped uncontrollably between my fingers and legs and underneath my arms. I'm certain the three guards sprawled out on the ground had noticed how electric I was too. They were all still unconscious.

"Nichelle, stop this," Quentin shouted from his knees. "That's an order."

"You're giving me an order?" Nichelle said. "I think you've got that backward, Q-bert." She crouched down until her face was inches from his and her eyes narrowed in anger. "You were the only family I had. And when things went bad you all left me to die. Michael Vey was my enemy, and he showed more mercy than all of you creeps combined."

"You and Vey?" Quentin said. "That's pathetic. You're going to be sorry."

"I was born sorry," Nichelle replied.

I looked at Quentin and shook my head. "Karma sucks, doesn't it?"

Ostin and Ian gathered the prone guards' weapons while Jack and McKenna took their keys and handcuffs.

"Lock them all up," I said.

“Problem,” McKenna said. “We don’t have enough handcuffs for all of them.”

There were five of them and only three pairs of handcuffs.

“No problem,” Ostin said. “Guys, give me a hand.”

We dragged two of the guards to opposite sides of the metal toilet, put a handcuff on one of the guard’s wrists, threaded it around back through the thick metal pipe that fed into the toilet, and attached it to the other guard’s wrist on the opposite side. We then made Quentin and Tara do the same thing with the second pair. With the last pair of handcuffs, we slid the guard up the base of the toilet and handcuffed his hands around it. By the time we were done they definitely weren’t going anywhere. And they looked pretty silly.

Nichelle smirked at Quentin and Tara. “You look like some weird monument to toilets.”

“You’re a loser, Nichelle,” Tara said. “You always were. That’s why everyone always hated you.”

“I’m so hurt,” she said. Nichelle put her hand out toward them and Tara and Quentin began to shake from the pain. “Who’s losing now?”

Tara screamed out in pain.

“Nichelle,” I said.

She turned toward me. “What?”

“That’s enough.”

“I’ve just started.”

“We’re not like them.”

She looked at me with a peculiar expression, then I saw a look I hadn’t seen on her before. She put her hand down. “No. *We’re* not like *them*.”

“Where’s Jade Dragon?” I asked Taylor.

“I don’t know,” Taylor said. “The Lung Li guards took her.”

I turned to Ian. “Do you see her?”

“No. Just a lot of armed guards looking for us.”

“We can worry about her later,” Ostin said. “We need to get out of here before the plant goes on full alert.”

As we stepped out into the hall a siren went off.

“Too late,” I said.

“We can’t leave without Jade Dragon,” Taylor said.

“We haven’t given up on her,” I said. “But for now, Ostin’s right. We need to get out of here if we can.” I turned around. “Ian, what’s going on?”

“Chaos,” he said. “This place looks like an angry beehive.”

“Can you see any way out?”

“No. But we’ve got to move. There are guards coming from both sides of this hall.”

I pointed to a large set of double doors. “What’s through there?”

“It’s the underside of the bowl,” he said. “It’s where they bring the fish in.”

“How many guards?”

“None. Just the feeders. All the guards are outside.”

Jack swiped one of the guards’ magnetic keys across the door pad and the door unlocked. We hurried inside and the door automatically locked behind us.

With the exception of a massive steel-plated pool in the center of the room, the space was similar to the Peruvian feeding room, rectangular with a resin-coated concrete floor and forty-foot-high ceilings that curved on one side with the exterior of the bowl. The room was humid and smelled like a fish market.

It stinks in here. I hate fish.

I looked over at Taylor. It was her voice, but she wasn’t talking. There was so much electricity in the air that I could read her thoughts.

“Ian, where do the wires from the lock run?”

He ran a finger down the wall. “Right here.”

“Tell me what this does.” I put my hand against the wall and pulsed. The intensity of the surge surprised me. Being directly under the bowl enhanced my powers to extreme levels.

“Dude, you melted the pad. You even melted some of the nails in the wall.”

“That should at least slow them down,” I said.

“Michael ...,” Taylor said. “Look.”

“*Bu dung!*” someone shouted. I turned around. There were now a half dozen men standing on the other side of the pool in bright orange jumpsuits with rubber waders and gloves. One of them was pointing a shotgun at us.

“*Da jya, syou chilai.*”

“He said, ‘Don’t move,’” Ostin said. “And put our hands up.”

“Are there any others with weapons?” I asked Ian.

“Not that I can see.”

“I’m going to reboot him,” Taylor said. She looked at the man intensely. At first he looked confused and lowered his gun as if he’d forgotten why he was holding it. Then he fell over unconscious. The other men turned and ran to a door in the back.

“I think you melted his brain,” Ostin said.

I walked over to the man and checked him. He was out but still breathing. I picked up his gun and threw it into the pool.

“Look at all those fish,” McKenna said, staring into the water. “There’s, like, a million of them.”

The pool was easily as large as the Olympic-sized one we had at Meridian High School, though much deeper. The water was dark and rough and the pool itself was steel-plated and riveted. There was a car-size, cagelike apparatus that hung from chains from the ceiling a few yards above the center of the pool, and a twelve-foot metal boat was tied to a cleat at the pool’s far edge.

“Ian, how do we get out of here?” I asked.

“I still don’t see a way out.”

“What about that door those guys ran through?”

“It’s just a freezer.”

“No pipes out?”

“No Weekend Express,” he said.

“We should use the pool,” Ostin said. “The tunnel leads out.”

“We can’t hold our breath that long,” Taylor said. “And there are fish.”

“Maybe there are scuba tanks in the back room,” Jack said.

“I don’t see any,” Ian said. “And there are still bars in the pipe.”

“Michael can cut through them,” Nichelle said.

“We still can’t hold our breath that long,” Taylor repeated.

“We can improvise a diving bell,” Ostin said.

“A what?” Taylor said.

“A diving bell. It’s how people centuries ago used to explore underwater. If we turn the boat upside down, there’s enough air in the boat to get us through the pipe.”

“Yeah, but the pipe is underwater,” Taylor said. “And the air keeps the boat from going underwater.”

“It’s a metal boat,” Ostin said. “And a metal pool. If Michael can magnetize enough he could pull the boat to the bottom, then we’ll walk along the bottom to the pipe.”

“It could work,” I said.

Something heavy started pounding against the door. “We’ve got to go,” Ian said. “A bunch of guards are trying to break in.”

“Let’s do this,” I said.

We ran over to the far side of the pool. Jack untied the boat, but it took all of us to flip it over.

“Everyone in the water,” I said.

“With the fish?” Taylor said.

“Or stay with the Elgen,” Jack said.

“They both stink,” Nichelle said.

“I’ll take the fish,” Taylor said.

We all jumped into the pool, then swam underneath the overturned boat. The inside of the boat was faintly lit by our glows. McKenna lit up her face to brighten it.

“Now what?” Taylor asked.

“I magnetize,” I said. I put one hand on the top of the boat, then reached the other toward the floor and pulsed. It took us a moment to realize that the boat was gradually descending.

“It’s working,” Ostin said.

I could see the floor of the pool coming closer. Every now and then Taylor would scream when a fish swam up against her. It took us about a minute to reach the bottom.

“How long will this air last?” Jack asked.

“Long enough,” Ostin said. “My worry is, how long will Michael last?”

Sweat was already pouring down my face. If it wasn’t for the extra power the bowl gave me I couldn’t have done it. “Which way to the pipe?” I asked.

“We spun a little on our way down,” Ian said. “It’s that way. Ten o’clock.”

“Everyone start walking,” Ostin said. “Start to the left.”

Everyone grabbed onto some part of the boat and pushed forward—everyone except for me. Holding the boat down was not only taking all of my strength, but it was also a difficult balancing act keeping the right amount of magnetism. Too much would crush us to the floor; not enough and we floated up and were unable to touch the bottom and push forward.

Ian kept us moving in the right direction, occasionally looking up to the feeding room. We had traveled about twenty feet when Ian said, “The Elgen

are in. They're looking for us."

"They'll never look down here," Ostin said.

"They just did," Ian said. "They're pointing at us." He paused. "Now they're pointing guns at us."

"Faster!" Ostin shouted. "We just need to make it to the pipe."

A bullet struck the side of the boat next to me, ricocheting with a loud clang. "That was too close."

"Thirty-five more feet to the pipe," Ian said.

Just then a bullet burst through the center of the boat, grazing Nichelle. "Ah!" she cried. She fell down into the water. Water gushed in through the hole. Jack grabbed her and lifted her as the water around us began to darken with her blood. "Where are you hit?"

"Shoulder," she said, grimacing in pain.

"Don't worry about pushing," he said. "Just walk."

The water level in the boat rose as air escaped through the bullet hole.

"Someone plug the hole!" I shouted.

Ian shoved his finger into it, stopping the flow. "Got it."

"How far to the pipe?" I asked.

"Thirty feet," Ian said.

Another bullet struck the boat, puncturing another hole through the metal. No one was hit but more water sprayed in. Ian stuck a finger in that hole as well. "They're setting up a machine gun," he said.

"We're not going to make it," Jack said. "It's like shooting fish in a barrel."

"That's it," Ostin said. "Michael, can you pulse hard?"

"I am pulsing hard!" I said.

"I mean electric, not magnetic."

"Why?"

Another bullet pierced the bow of the boat and more water sprayed in. McKenna stuck her finger in the hole to stop it.

"They've got the machine gun up!" Ian shouted.

"Just pulse!" Ostin shouted.

"I'll shock everyone."

"They're aiming," Ian said.

"Do it!" Ostin shouted. "Everyone prepare to be Tasered. Go!"

I pulsed. Everyone screamed and Ostin, Jack, and Taylor fell into the water, then stood back up.

“Man, that hurt,” Ostin said.

Then Taylor screamed as paralyzed fish floated up all around us. “What did you do?”

“Electric fishing,” Ostin said. “Michael just stunned all the fish and they floated to the top of the pool. The Elgen won’t be able to see us or shoot us through them.”

“He’s right,” Ian said. “It’s like a six-foot barrier of fish.”

We reached the corrugated pipe floor without being hit by any more bullets, but the pipe brought another problem. The farther we got from the bowl, the more difficult it was for me. I felt like I went from carrying a hundred pounds to two hundred. I groaned beneath the strain.

“Are you okay?” Taylor asked.

“How much farther?” I asked.

“We’re getting close,” Ian replied.

Suddenly there was a huge surge of water, pushing us forward and up against the first set of bars. My head hit the side of the boat hard enough that, for a second, I lost magnetism and the boat started to flip over. Jack threw himself against it, holding it for a few seconds before I regained control.

“Michael, are you okay?” Taylor said.

“Yes,” I replied, my head aching. “Sorry.”

“They threw a grenade,” Ian said. “It’s like fish stew out there.”

“At least we’re at the bars,” I said.

“Can you cut through them?” Ostin asked.

I moved to the front of the boat and grabbed onto a bar. It was thicker than anything I had cut through so far. As I began to heat up, the back of the boat began to rise. I stopped to pull it back down. I looked at Ostin. “I can’t magnetize the boat and cut through the bars at the same time.”

“It’s okay,” Ostin said. “We’re in the pipe. Just let the boat float to the top.”

“Let it up easy,” Jack said. “If it flips, we drown.”

I slowly let the boat rise until it knocked against the top of the pipe. Everyone was now treading water.

I grabbed the bar again and began to cut. It took me nearly five minutes to burn through the first bar, the water boiling next to my hand. I’d have to cut through at least five bars to get the boat through. We were still losing air and the water level was rising in the boat at about an inch a minute. At that

rate we would be out of air before I cut through the pipes, and I was already exhausted. I don't think I could have pulled us back down to the bottom if I wanted to.

"Ian, how far is it from these bars to the end of the pipe?" I asked.

"About twenty yards."

"Are there any more bars before the end of the pipe?"

"No. The next bars are at the first fence, about twenty-five yards past the end of the pipe."

"So if we make it to the end of the pipe, we can swim up."

"Yes. We'll still have the fences, but we'll be outside the plant."

"Are there guards up there?"

"Not yet," he said. "Why?"

"I don't think I can make the cuts with the air we have left. And even if I did, I can't make it much farther magnetizing the boat. The farther we get from the bowls the harder it gets."

Taylor put her hand on my arm. "What do we do?"

"If I take out one more bar we can swim for it."

"I don't think I can swim it," Nichelle said. "I'm not a good swimmer."

"Can you hold your breath for thirty seconds?" Jack asked.

She looked at him. "I think so."

"Then you can do it. If you can't swim, I'll carry you out."

Nichelle looked at him quizzically. "Why?"

"We don't leave family behind."

For a moment Nichelle was speechless. "Thank you."

"Okay," I said. "Let's do this." I went back to cutting. By the time I cut through the second bar there was only six inches of air left in the boat. The gap between the bars was at least twenty-four inches wide. "We can fit through that," Ian said.

"Can we see which way to swim?" McKenna asked.

"It's a little lighter toward the end of the pipe," Ian said.

"Any guards yet?"

"Not before the first fence. If we stay close to the building they might not see us. There's some kind of concrete retaining wall I think we can hide behind."

"Maybe I should go first," Taylor said. "I'm a good swimmer. And that way I can reboot anyone on top."

Ostin looked at me. "Are you strong enough?"

“I can make it,” I said.

“I’ll go after Taylor,” McKenna said. “I can help fight if someone’s up there.”

“Who’s next?” Ian asked.

“Ostin, Nichelle, and Jack,” I said.

“What about you?” Ian asked.

“I’ll go last,” I said. “I need a minute to rest.”

“You know as soon as we unplug these holes you’ll only have a minute of air.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m okay.”

Taylor swam up to the front next to me. “Are you sure you’re strong enough?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Be careful.”

She kissed me. “I’ll see you outside.” She grabbed the bars, took a deep breath, then disappeared under the water.

“I’m ready,” McKenna said. “But someone’s going to have to plug this hole.”

“I’ll get it,” I said.

Water gushed in as McKenna pulled her finger out of the bullet hole. I reached up past her and pushed my finger into the hole. “Got it.”

“Go,” Ian said.

McKenna inhaled, then ducked under, leaving the boat dim with just Ian’s and my glow.

Ostin looked at me nervously. He had never been much of a swimmer.

“You can do it,” I said. “Remember summer camp.”

“Right.” He took a deep breath, then went.

Jack helped Nichelle to the front. “Are you ready?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

To my surprise, Nichelle kissed Jack on the cheek. “Thank you.” She took a deep breath, ducked under the boat, and swam through the bars. Jack swam after her.

“Just us,” I said to Ian.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Let’s do it.”

He pulled his fingers out of the holes and water shot in like two high-pressure water hoses. He inhaled once, then dove under.

I tried to take a deep breath, but what was left of the air was pretty thin.
“You can do this,” I said to myself. I grabbed onto the bars and pulled myself underwater, then swam as fast as I could toward the end of the pipe.



I must have run into a hundred fish on the way up. I broke the pool's surface gasping for air. Someone grabbed me by the back of my shirt and lifted me out of the water. I almost pulsed before I saw it was Jack. Somehow, in spite of his injuries, he had found the strength to lift me to shore.

The shrill, ear-piercing sound of alarms filled the air. Everyone was sitting on the ground in puddles, soaked and out of breath, partially shielded behind a concrete retaining wall about four feet high. When I caught my breath I said, "We made it."

"Thanks to you," Taylor said.

"Are you okay?" I asked Nichelle.

"I'll make it. The bleeding's not too bad, it just stings."

"It's the salt water," Ostin said.

"Let me see," Jack said. He rolled her sleeve up over her shoulder to examine the wound, then he ripped a piece of cloth from his undershirt and wrapped it around Nichelle's shoulder as a bandage.

"Thank you," she said. "Again."

I looked at Ian. "Any guards?"

"Just ahead at the fences."

"What's this wall?"

"It's a storm wall," Ostin said. "It keeps water from the plant. In the last fifty years Taiwan's been hit by more than two hundred typhoons."

We were fortunate to have something to hide behind; otherwise the Elgen would have already been shooting at us. The sun hadn't risen yet, but the compound was lit by flood lamps and was as bright as a nighttime football game. I could see the Elgen guards at the closest fence, which was less than a hundred feet from where we were. There was little movement outside other than the constant panning motion of surveillance cameras.

"There's too many cameras out here," I said.

"I'll try to put some out," Nichelle replied. She reached out and several of the closest cameras stopped moving.

As I surveyed our surroundings, everything seemed even more hopeless than it had inside the plant. I realized that getting out of the plant might have been the easy part.

"Does anyone have any ideas on how to get out of here?" I asked.

Ostin shook his head. "This place used to be a prison. It was made to keep people in."

"If we try to climb the fences they'll shoot us," Jack said.

"Michael's the only one who can climb them anyway," Taylor said. "They're electrified."

"And don't forget the landmines," Ian added.

"There's no way out of here," Taylor said.

Suddenly the alarms stopped, which should have made things less stressful, but it didn't. The Elgen must have turned them off for a reason. I wondered if they had found us. I looked over at Ostin. His head was down and he looked like he was lost in thought.

"What have you got, Ostin?"

Without looking up he said, "Ian, what do the landmines look like?"

"I don't know. They look like landmines."

"What shape?"

"They're round, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"There are different kinds," he said, sounding annoyed.

"Are some big?"

“Define *big*.”

“Bigger than a car tire?”

“Yes. Some of them.”

“Are the big ones made of metal or plastic?”

He looked back out. “Looks like metal.”

“Can you see wires inside of them?”

Ian shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

Ostin was quiet a moment, then shook his head. “After the Korean War, the Chinese farmers used to clear fields of landmines by starting fires. I was thinking that maybe McKenna could melt the triggering devices. But it won’t work. McKenna would be too bright a target for them. They’d just shoot her.”

“Not a good plan,” McKenna said.

“I could stand in front of her and deflect the bullets.”

“No you couldn’t,” Ostin said. “Or you would be *on* the landmine.”

“And we’d still have to get over the fences,” Taylor said.

Ostin bowed his head again. Then suddenly his expression changed as if he’d had an idea. “Ian, can you see any balls in the mines?”

His brow furrowed. “Balls?”

“Little ones. Like ball bearings. Just look.”

He looked back out. “Yes. In the big ones.”

“How about the small ones?”

“No.”

“Awesome,” Ostin said. “How close are the mines to one another?”

“Depends. Some are, like, three feet.”

“Sympathetic detonation,” Ostin said to himself. “Is there a pattern? Like a small one next to a big one?”

“The way they’re arranged looks like a flower,” Ian said. “There’s one large surrounded by one, two, three ... six little ones around it like petals.”

“How close are the flowers to one another?”

“Close. Less than six feet.”

“Do you have an idea?” I asked.

Ostin was still formulating. “Are the mines near the fences?”

“They’re everywhere,” Ian said.

“But how close to the fences?”

“In some places just a few feet. Some are right under the fence.”

“Yes,” Ostin said. “I think they might have given us a way out.” He turned to me. “The big mines in the center of the clusters are antitank mines. They’re there to stop vehicles from just running through the fences. The smaller mines surrounding them are antipersonnel mines—they’re triggered by light pressure; if someone steps on them, they blow up. The antitank mines have a magnetic switch. When the metal ball moves around inside of it, it detonates the explosive. But because it’s so close to the other mines, it will probably detonate all six of them with it.”

“Why would they put them so close to one another?”

“To maximize the blast radius. But the clusters are so close to one another that it might set off multiple clusters. It might even cause a chain reaction.”

“So what’s the plan?” I asked.

“You need to create a magnetic force powerful enough to trigger as many of the switches as possible. The antitank mines can blow through a tank, so they can easily shred the fence. If we can blow them all up at the same time, the guards won’t know what hit them.”

“I don’t know if I can magnetize that far,” I said.

“Not without a boost.” He thought for a moment, then turned to Nichelle. “Can you do the opposite of what you normally do?”

Nichelle was sitting on the ground holding her shoulder, her makeshift bandage soaked with blood. I wondered if she would even be able to walk. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Can you *give* power instead of taking it?”

“You mean like Tessa?”

“Exactly.”

“I might. Not as powerfully as Tessa, but maybe some.”

“We need to test it,” Ostin said. He turned to me. “Make a small spark.”

I held my thumb and index finger about an inch apart and a thin bolt of electricity began to spark between them. Nichelle looked at the spark. She held her hand out toward me, but nothing happened.

“Try touching him,” Ostin said.

She reached over and touched me on the shoulder. The spark snapped between my fingers. I looked at her and she was smiling. “It worked.”

“It did,” I said. “I could feel it.” I looked back at everyone. “If this works, we’re going to have to run. I’ll go in front in case the guards start

shooting. Nichelle, you stay with me, touching me. Taylor, create as much mental confusion as you can.”

“There will probably be some of the smaller landmines that don’t go off,” Ostin said. “Ian needs to watch in front of us for undetonated landmines.”

“We should move in a single-file line,” I said.

“Got it,” Ian said.

“No one steps out of line,” I said. “Ready?”

I looked at Taylor and she nodded.

“Cover your ears,” Ostin said. “If this works it’s going to be *loud*.”

“All right, Nichelle,” I said. “Power me up.”

She put her hand on my shoulder. I could feel her energy coursing through me. I stood up and stretched my hand out toward the yard. Someone shouted out in Chinese, but if they had seen us it was too late. *Way* too late. The yard exploded. The shock wave knocked us all back. It was as if the entire compound lifted ten feet into the air. I don’t know if I managed to pull all the triggers at once or, as Ostin predicted, the proximity of the bombs to one another caused a split-second chain reaction throughout the entire compound, but regardless, it was impossible to tell where the explosion started. The flash from delayed explosions reflected off massive columns of smoke that rose hundreds of feet into the sky, shrouding the entire compound in an impenetrable cloud. The peninsula was so thick with black smoke it was impossible to see anything, even one another.

When the explosions finally stopped there was no sound but the ringing in our ears. Then a distant machine gun started firing.

“It’s coming from one of the towers,” Ian said. “He’s firing blind. He just shot his own guys. He has no idea where we are.”

“Are the fences down?” I asked.

“Shredded,” Ian said.

“Then let’s go. Which way?”

“Move straight ahead. Be careful as you walk, the ground is mostly craters.”

“Nichelle?” I asked.

“Right here,” she said. She put her hand on my shoulder. I covered my mouth with my arm and held my hand out, pulsing to deflect bullets.

“You’re clear for sixty feet, Michael. Straight ahead,” Ian said, before breaking out coughing. I started forward with Nichelle holding on to me.

We moved slowly and blindly. As Ian had warned, the ground was broken up, and my nostrils were filled with the pungent smell of fresh earth mixed with smoke and the acrid stink of explosives.

“The fourth fence is still partially up,” Ian said. “I can see some undetonated landmines.”

I froze. “In front of me?”

“Not yet. Keep walking.”

“Should I magnetize again?”

“No!” Ostin shouted. “If there are any undetonated landmines around us we’re dead.”

“I’ll keep watching for them,” Ian said. “Duck a little, Michael. You’re about to pass through the first fence.”

I reached out and touched pieces of twisted wire. “Careful!” I shouted back.

“The second fence is thirty feet straight ahead. After the third fence we’ll need to go twenty yards to the right.”

“What are the soldiers doing?”

“Their commander is trying to gather them, but they still can’t see anything.”

“Neither can I,” Taylor said, erupting in a fit of coughing.

“Let’s hope the smoke remains,” Ian said. “We’ll have to pass right through the middle of their camp.”

I continued forward another twelve feet when Ian shouted, “Stop!”

I froze, my foot in the air.

“Don’t move, Michael. You’re right above a mine.”

“Where?”

“Right where your foot is about to go.”

Nichelle pulled me back.

“Step to your left twice, walk ahead five feet, then two steps back to this same path.”

“All right, left two feet.” I stepped over. “Ahead five feet.” I walked forward. “Ian, keep your eyes on that mine.”

“Sorry I missed that. I’m going to stand next to it,” Ian said. “Taylor, you’re too close. Step more to the left.”

“Thank you,” she said.

I walked about twenty feet past it, then stopped.

After Jack had passed the mine, Ian walked back up behind Nichelle.
“Okay, let’s go.”

We began to move forward again. We passed through the second fence. It was still sparking where the electrical wires had been separated, and I reached over and grabbed the wire, letting it spark in my hand. “This fence is still live,” I said.

“Why are you doing that?” Nichelle asked.

“I like it,” I said. “It’s like an energy drink.” I paused for just a moment, then continued on. We had moved another forty feet when I heard Jack shout, “Stop!”

We all turned back.

“I think I stepped on something,” Jack said.

Ian groaned. “You’re on a mine.”

“Why didn’t it blow?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s either bad,” Ostin said, “or it’s the kind that blows up as soon as you release pressure.”

“Jack, don’t move,” I said.

“Just get out of here,” he replied. “The smoke’s already starting to clear.”

“We’re not leaving you,” I said.

“You don’t have a choice,” he said.

“Yes, we do,” Nichelle said. “We don’t leave family behind.”

“Didn’t you say that heat could melt the trigger?” McKenna asked Ostin.

Ostin looked anxious. “Yes, but you would have to be right next to it.”

McKenna turned back. “Then let’s do this. Ian, tell me when it’s melted.” She felt her way back to Jack, then knelt down on the ground next to him.

“What are you doing?” Jack said. “Get out of here.”

“We’re getting you out,” she said.

“It’s too dangerous,” Jack said.

“Tell me about it,” McKenna replied. She leaned over his foot, and her hand began to lightly glow.

“McKenna, they’ll see your fire,” Ostin said.

“Not if we stand around her,” I said. “Ian, are there any undetonated mines around this one?”

“No, it’s an outlier.”

The smoke had cleared enough that we could see one another’s shadows. I walked over to Jack’s side, followed by Taylor, Ian, and Nichelle. Ostin

got down on his knees next to McKenna. “If this thing goes, we’re all going with you.”

Nichelle knelt down next to McKenna. “I can help,” she said. “I’m going to touch you.” She laid her hand on McKenna’s back. “You’re trembling.”

“I know,” McKenna said. She set her hand flat on the ground next to Jack’s foot and her hand began glowing again, orange at first, then brighter, until it was white-hot.

“Not too hot!” Ostin said. “The heat could set it off.”

She quickly backed off.

“I think she did it,” Ian said. “Everything is melted inside. The wires look ... wilted.”

“Wilted?” Ostin said.

Ian shrugged. “Yeah.”

“You ready, Jack?” I said.

“I’m not taking my foot off until you’re all gone. I mean it.”

“We’ve got to go, Jack,” I said.

“So go!” he said. “*I mean it.*”

I exhaled. “Come on.” Everyone walked forward, stopping about thirty steps ahead. “Now, Jack!” I shouted.

Even though we couldn’t see him, we didn’t need to. If McKenna’s work had failed we’d all know soon enough. We all held our breath. A moment later Ian said, “He’s off.”

I breathed out in relief. “All right, let’s keep going.”

The smoke was beginning to dissipate and as we neared the Taiwanese army at the perimeter of the compound the sound of shouting intensified. I passed through the shredded remains of the third fence, then turned back.

“Ian, where to?”

“Sixty feet to the right. But stay in the middle of the strip—there’s undetonated antipersonnel mines on each side. The fence isn’t down, there’s just a hole. We’ll have to crawl through it.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll come out next to one of the army tents. There’s no one in it. When we get there I’ll come up front and lead everyone through the army camp.”

“Got it.”

Carefully keeping my distance from either fence, Nichelle and I took about thirty steps before Ian said, “You’re there.” The spotlights were

especially intense around the army camp and I could make out the silhouettes of several tents just past the fence, which meant that if we got too close, the soldiers would be able to see us too. The hole in the mangled fence was about the diameter of a bike tire and I got down on my knees and began to crawl through. A stray piece of razor wire caught above my elbow, ripping my skin and stinging like crazy. Blood streamed down my arm. "Agh," I said.

"Are you okay?" Nichelle asked.

"I'm great," I said. I bent the wire back, then Nichelle and I crawled the rest of the way through, stopping just a few yards from the fence to wait for everyone else. As Ian came through he said, "You're bleeding."

"I know," I said. "We'll deal with it later. Where to now?"

"There's a trail about fifty yards southeast that leads up into the hills."

"Go ahead and take the lead," I said. "Nichelle and I will protect the rear."

We waited until everyone else passed, then crouched down and followed Ian through the center of the army's camp. We could hear soldiers shouting around us in Chinese, but everything was in such chaos that even if someone had seen us I'm not sure they would have known who we were. As we neared the trail leading up the hill Nichelle froze. "Stop," she said.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"There are Glows around," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm always sure."

"Can you tell who it is?"

"Not yet."

"Stay alert," I said to everyone.

We crossed a dirt road to a line of trees, then began climbing a steep wooded incline. The camp's lights were no longer on us, and we hiked in darkness with Ian carefully choosing our path. We were about a hundred yards away from the compound when bolts of lightning began striking the camp, followed by more shouting and chaos. Occasionally a strike was followed by an explosion.

"Zeus?" I asked.

"Sure is," Ian said. "I think he's trying to distract them from us." We continued hiking up the hill until we were above the line of smoke but still well secluded in the darkness of the forest.

“Now what?” Jack asked.

“We get out of here,” I said. “Hopefully Zeus brought something to drive. Ian, we need to somehow get Zeus’s attention.”

“We’re okay,” Ian said. “Ben’s here.”

I looked over as Ben walked out from between some trees.

“Where’d you come from?” I asked.

He held up a pair of night-vision binoculars. “I have been watching you. It was very smoky.” He lifted his radio. “Zeus, they are here. Go now to meeting place.” He turned back to me. “We were trying to figure out how to rescue you when the alarms went off.”

“How did you know we were captured?” Taylor asked.

“You left everything in your hotel room.” He looked around. “Is everyone here?”

“Yes.”

There was one last storm of lightning bolts striking the camp, followed by a massive explosion. The display reminded me of the finale of a fireworks show.

“What was that?” I asked.

“We brought bombs to blow up the road in case they tried to follow us,” Ben said. “We must go now. Come.”

“I see the car,” Ian said.

It was another five minutes before the rest of us saw it. Concealed in dense forest was an all-black Range Rover. “It will be crowded,” Ben said. “But we will fit.”

Everyone had gotten in except for me when Zeus and Tessa came running up. They were both out of breath.

“Hurry!” Ben shouted.

“Good to see you two,” I said, holding the door for them.

“Looks like you’ve had some fun,” Zeus said, helping Tessa in.

He got in and I jumped in after him, holding my arm. Ben hit the gas and the car lurched forward, its wheels spinning in the dirt before intersecting with an asphalt road.

“Hey, guys,” Zeus said, still panting, “I thought we weren’t going to try to break in.”

“Wasn’t our plan,” I said. “We were captured.”

“Where’s Jade Dragon?” Tessa asked.

“She’s still inside,” Taylor said, hurt evident in her voice. She looked at me. “Michael, you’re really bleeding.”

“I cut myself on some wire.”

“Here,” Jack said. He ripped another piece from his undershirt.

“I’ll do it,” Taylor said. She leaned over the back of my seat and wrapped the cloth around my throbbing arm. The cloth slowly turned red with blood. “I hope you don’t need stitches,” Taylor said.

We drove past three police cars with flashing lights, followed by a fire truck and some military vehicles. Within five minutes we were back on a major thoroughfare with traffic. Ben drove past the Kaohsiung off-ramp.

“I think you missed the exit,” Jack said. “The hotel’s back there.”

“We are going someplace else,” Ben said. About ten minutes past Kaohsiung, Ben exited the highway into the shipping district. We drove past a long harbor filled with cargo ships, freighters, and barges.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To a safe house,” Ben said.

The safe house wasn’t really a house—it was a large, abandoned-looking warehouse just two blocks from the waterfront. The building was surrounded by a tall chain-link fence with razor wire and security cameras.

Ben unlocked the gate, then drove the SUV inside and got back out to lock the gate behind us. Then he pushed a remote and a large overhead door in the warehouse opened. He drove inside, then shut the overhead door after us. A light went on, exposing a large open garage with several different vehicles and stacks of crates on wooden pallets. Ben shut off the engine and turned around.

“This is where we will stay until the *Volta* arrives.”

“How many days is that?” I asked.

“The boat is still two thousand kilometers out,” he said. “Maybe three days.” He looked us over. “Do you know you escaped from an inescapable prison?”

“What do you mean?” Taylor asked.

“The Zuoying prison is famous like your Alcatraz prison in America. No one has ever escaped. And the Elgen made it even more strong.”

“Not to mention the Taiwanese army camped around it,” Jack said.

“Yes, with an army around it, you still escaped. You should be very proud of what you have done.”

“We owe our escape to Nichelle,” I said. “If it wasn’t for her we wouldn’t have gotten out. And if she hadn’t gotten us in there, we never would have gotten Taylor out.” I looked Nichelle in the eyes. “I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“Me too,” Ian said.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “We owe you.”

Nichelle looked at the wall, then shrugged. “It’s okay. I wouldn’t have trusted me either.”

“We need to get you bandaged up,” Jack said to her.

“And Michael,” Taylor said.

“Upstairs we have medicine and a wrap.”

We got out of the car. As we walked over to the stairwell Jack asked Ben, “Do you have anything for pain?” He must have been in a lot of pain because I’d never heard him ask for as much as an aspirin.

“Yes,” he said, opening the stairwell door. “Also upstairs.”

“I hope it’s good,” Jack said.

“I am,” Abigail said. She stood at the foot of the steps.

Jack looked as if he’d seen a ghost. “What are you doing here?”

“I missed you, so they let me come.”

They hugged and the pain left Jack’s face. He sighed with relief.

“Let’s get you wrapped up,” she said.

As we climbed the stairs Ben said, “I know you must be very tired and hungry. We have food and beds.”

“Thank goodness,” Ostin said. “I’m starving.”

“We’ll make something to eat,” Tessa said to Ben. “You take care of the wounded.”

The stairwell opened into a kitchen, and Nichelle, Jack, and I sat around the kitchen table. Ben walked out of the room, then returned with a plastic case with a large red cross on it.

“Nichelle first,” I said.

Nichelle pulled her sleeve up over her shoulder and unwound the makeshift bandage Jack had made for her. The bullet had grazed her, leaving a four-inch red trough across her shoulder. The wound was deep but wasn’t bleeding anymore. The biggest casualty was her full-shoulder tattoo of the grim reaper.

“I didn’t like that tattoo much anyway,” she said.

“This will hurt,” Ben said, lifting a brown bottle with Chinese markings.

“Hold on,” Jack said. “Abi, help Nichelle.”

Abi stepped back. “I’m not taking her pain away.”

For a moment there was silent tension, then Nichelle said, “It’s okay. After all the pain I caused her, I deserve it.”

“No,” Jack said. “It’s not right.” He looked Abigail in the eyes. “She’s changed. You need to help her.”

Abigail looked at Jack incredulously. “No, I *don’t*.”

“It’s okay,” Nichelle said.

The tension in the room was palpable. Abigail looked at us, then angrily shook her head. “Fine.” She reached over and touched Nichelle. “Do it.”

Ben poured the liquid over Nichelle’s shoulder and it foamed up around the wound. He patted it dry, then taped a large piece of gauze over it.

“Thank you,” Nichelle said. She turned to Abigail, who had already stepped back from her. “You’re right. I didn’t deserve it, but thank you anyway.”

Abigail didn’t reply.

“Your turn, Michael,” Ben said. “Let me see your arm now.”

I took off my shirt, which was more painful than I expected because the fabric had stuck to the wound. It started bleeding again. The cut was about three inches long and deep enough to reveal yellow tissue and muscle. The entire area was covered with dirt. “We must clean it first,” Ben said. He led me over to the kitchen counter, and I held my arm over the sink. He turned the water on and waited until it was warm, then lifted the sink sprayer and rinsed my wound until the dirt had all run off into the sink. I grimaced with pain.

“Sorry,” Ben said.

Taylor was drying my wound off with a terry cloth towel when she suddenly exclaimed, “You got your watch back.”

“I thought Hatch took it,” Ostin said.

I looked around the room. Everyone was looking at me. “He did,” I said. “They gave it back.”

Ostin stared at me incredulously. “Hatch gave you your watch back?”

“I didn’t say Hatch,” I said.

“Then who?” he asked.

I wasn’t ready to tell them about my father. “Just one of the Elgen,” I said. I noticed that Ian was looking at me with a curious expression. “Can we get back to my arm?”

“Sorry,” Taylor said. “I was just glad to see it again.”

“Let me look at your arm,” Ben said. His forehead furrowed. “We have a needle and thread for stitches, but we do not have a doctor.”

“Maybe we could just bandage it tight,” Taylor said.

“It’s a laceration,” Ostin said. “It needs to be stitched.”

“I can stitch it,” Nichelle said.

“You can stitch?” I asked.

“I like to sew. After I got out on the street I sewed up a few guys after fights.” She frowned. “It’s going to hurt.”

“I’ll be your anesthetic,” Abigail said. She took my arm. Even though I could still feel it throbbing, the pain immediately went away.

Nichelle took a needle and thread from the first aid kit while Ben poured liquid from the brown bottle over my wound.

Nichelle walked up next to me with the needle. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think you should watch,” she said.

I turned away. I could feel the needle tug at my skin, but, thanks to Abigail, the pain was as minor as someone pinching my cheek. It took Nichelle about five minutes to finish stitching up my arm. Finally she said, “That should do.”

I looked over. The stitching looked professional.

“You’re good.”

“It’s just like stitching a pillow,” Nichelle said. “Except there’s a lot of blood and tissue and puss.”

“That’s graphic,” Ostin said.

“I’m going to put a bandage over it,” Taylor said. She wrapped a piece of gauze around my arm and taped it.

“You can let go,” I said to Abigail.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

As she let go of me, pain shot through my arm as if the needle was just going in. Abigail saw me blanch and grabbed my arm. “Sometimes it hurts more than you think it will.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’ve got to get used to it.”

She slowly released my arm again. The pain came back but at least this time I was expecting it.

“Not to interrupt all the fun you’re having over there, but the food is ready,” Tessa said.

Zeus and Tessa had made a large pot of ramen noodles with shrimp and eggs, along with a dozen peanut butter sandwiches. Taylor got bowls for both of us. I was hungrier than I realized, and I gulped down a bowl of noodles and two sandwiches.

After eating, everyone went to the sleeping quarters to rest, leaving Taylor, Ben, and me sitting alone at the table.

“What time do you think it is?” I asked.

“You are wearing a watch,” Ben said.

“I forgot.” I looked at it. “I think it’s still on Peru time.”

“I think maybe nine o’clock,” Ben said. “It was a long night.”

I looked over at Taylor, who was staring off into space. It was one of those times that I wished I could read her mind. “Are you okay?”

“I was just thinking,” she said softly.

“About what?”

She looked at me. “When we decided to come here it was to stop the Elgen from getting information that could threaten the world. I never thought about Jade Dragon being a real person. But now I know her, and she’s really scared.” Her eyes welled up. “We have to save her. Not just to save the world, but to save *her*.”

“We’ll save her,” I said. “Our plan will work. It’s just a few days more.” I looked at Ben. “Are we safe here?”

“We have alarms and sentries that can fire six guns.” He looked at us, then breathed out slowly. “But the Elgen are powerful. I do not know if we are ever safe.”

We fell silent. After a few minutes Taylor said, “I think I’ll go to sleep.”

“Me too,” I said, rising.

* * *

The upstairs of the warehouse was divided into a kitchen, two bathrooms (connected to the sleeping quarters), a television area, a radio room, and two long, rectangular rooms for sleeping, each with six cots. After Taylor had gone to bed I walked over to the men’s side.

The sleeping quarters reminded me of pictures I had seen in a history textbook of a World War II army hospital. It wasn’t the Grand Hi-Lai Hotel, but I wasn’t complaining either. I’d sleep on dirt as long as it didn’t belong

to the Elgen. Still, less than an hour later I woke thinking about my father. Even after all we had done to escape, a part of me wanted to go back to see him.

After a half hour I walked out to the kitchen. I found some tea bags and put a kettle on the stove. As the kettle started to whistle, Ian walked into the kitchen.

“Did I wake you?” I asked.

“No. I couldn’t sleep. Too much on my mind.”

I turned off the flame, then lifted the kettle from the stove. “Want some tea?”

“Sure.”

I poured two cups to the brim, then carried them both to the table. For a moment we both just sipped our drinks in silence. Then Ian said, “Something’s bothering you.”

“You can see my thoughts now too?”

He smiled. “No. That’s Taylor’s gig. Am I right?”

I paused a moment, then said, “Yeah.”

“What’s up?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“Does it have to do with your watch?”

I wondered how he knew that. “Yes.” I looked down at my cup, then back at him. “You need to keep this a secret. I don’t know how the others will take this.”

“I’m always keeping secrets,” he said. “That’s what happens when you see everything.”

I hesitated a moment then said, “I saw my father back at the Starxource plant.”

Ian looked as if he wasn’t sure how to respond. “I thought your father was dead.”

“I thought he was, but he’s not. He’s part of the Elgen.”

“When did you see him?”

“Right after we were brought into the plant. One of the Lung Li was torturing me and my father came in and stopped them. He took care of me. That’s when he gave me back my watch.”

Ian was quiet a moment, then said, “No, he didn’t.”

His response annoyed me. “What do you mean, ‘No, he didn’t’? I was there.”

“That wasn’t your father who gave you back your watch.”

For a moment I was speechless. “Then who was it?”

“Hatch. And Tara.”

“What?”

“Hatch was sitting right next to you and Tara was standing near the door. She must have a new trick.”

My head spun with confusion. I began to tick.

Ian leaned toward me. “Think about it. Hatch tortured you. He’s caged and tortured your mother. Would your father have allowed that?”

After a moment I shook my head. “No.”

“I was waiting until everyone was asleep to talk to you about this. I saw Hatch give you the watch. I also saw you put your arms around him. I knew there had to be something strange going on.”

My mind boiled with emotion. The anger and hurt I understood, but there was disappointment too.

After a few minutes Ian said, “Aren’t you relieved that your father’s not part of the Elgen?”

“I should be.”

Ian frowned. “But you aren’t?”

“I feel like I just lost my father again.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Suddenly I remembered all I had told Hatch. I lowered my head into my hands. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“I told him about the voice.”

“You what?”

I looked up. “I didn’t mean to. It just came out.”

Ian looked at me anxiously. “Did you tell him anything else?”

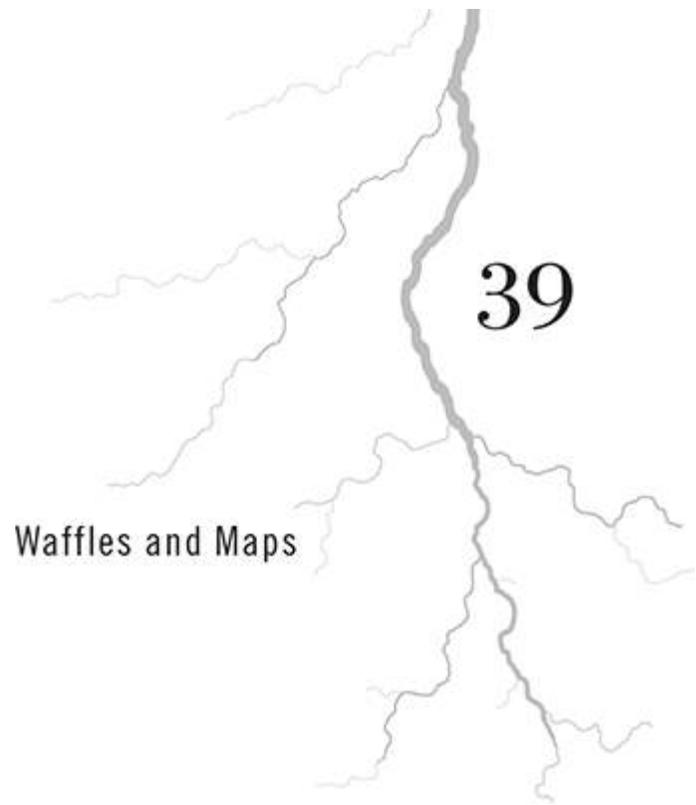
“He asked me where my mother was. I told him about the ranch. I told him where it was.”

“You couldn’t have told him where the ranch was. We didn’t even know where it was.”

I hung my head, covering my eyes with my hands. “He asked me how long the flight was from the ranch to Pasadena. Then he asked me about the weather. I told him the temperature.” I felt sick to my stomach. “I thought it was my father.” I looked up at him. “He couldn’t find them from that, could he?”

Ian shook his head. "I don't know. Let's hope not." He breathed out slowly. "We need to tell Ben."

I buried my head in my hands again. "What have I done?"



When I woke up the next morning, Ostin was standing next to my cot.

“What’s up?” I said groggily.

“Not you.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s like noon,” he said. “Can you smell that?”

I breathed in. “Yeah. It smells good.”

“Good? Dude, Ben’s making waffles.”

I sat up. “There aren’t waffles in Taiwan.”

“Do not be too sure of it,” Ben said. I looked up to see Ben standing in the doorway. “Get up. I have made American-style breakfast.”

“Give me a minute,” I said.

After Ostin and Ben had left the room I pulled on my pants and shirt, then walked barefoot out to the kitchen. There was a plate stacked tall with waffles. Taylor was standing at the stove making omelets with ham and peppers. “Good morning, sleepyhead,” she said.

I walked over to her side. “Omelets?”

She pecked me on the cheek. “Yes, but without cheese. Apparently the Chinese aren’t into cheese.”

“Nearly ninety percent of people of Asian descent are lactose intolerant,” Ostin said. “That means they can’t digest milk.”

“I’m not,” McKenna said.

“That’s because you’re special.”

“I know,” she said, smiling.

“Would you like an omelet?” Taylor asked.

“Yes. Thank you.”

She scooped up an omelet and put it on a plate. “There you go. Waffles are on the table.”

Nichelle was sitting at the end of the table next to Ian and McKenna. Jack was sitting on the opposite end next to Abigail. She was rubbing his back.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Jack.

“Better. Now it only hurts when I breathe,” he said wryly.

“I think they broke every rib he has,” Abigail said.

“Not all of them,” Ian said.

“I forgot we had a human X-ray,” Jack said. “So how many are broken?”

“Eleven.”

“How many ribs does he have?” Abigail asked.

“The human body has twenty-four ribs,” Ostin said. “Though ten of them are called false ribs since they aren’t connected to the sternum.”

“Another lesson,” Abigail sighed.

“How are you feeling?” Jack asked me.

“Better. I think Nichelle did a good job with those stitches.”

Nichelle smiled. “Anytime.”

“I hope not,” I replied. I took a waffle from a stack on the table, then sat down next to Nichelle. “Where’re Zeus and Tessa?”

“They’re on the roof,” Jack said.

“What are they doing on the roof?”

“They’re on lookout.”

“When did we start doing that?”

“This morning.”

“There’s syrup,” Taylor said. “At least a version of it. It’s made from boiled sugar.” She pointed to a saucepan on the table. “It might be cold.”

“I can take care of that,” McKenna said. She put her hand above the pan and it heated up. Within seconds the syrup started to boil. She handed me the pan.

“Thank you,” I said. I poured a little on top. It didn’t taste like maple syrup, but it wasn’t bad.

“Does the waffle taste correct?” Ben asked. “I learned the recipe from the Internet.”

“They taste great,” I said. “Where did you get a waffle iron?”

“From the same place I got my weapons,” he replied.

“I’m glad they’re thinking of us,” I said. I ate for a few minutes, then asked Ben, “What’s on the agenda today?”

He looked at me blankly.

“What are we doing today?”

“We wait inside,” he said. “Everyone is looking for us. The Elgen, the Taiwan army, and the police. There has been much on the television about the attack. They say the terrorists tried to shut down the Elgen plant but the Taiwan army stopped them.”

“Yeah, right,” Ostin said. “We walked through the middle of their camp, and they didn’t even see us.”

“Public relations,” Ben said.

I looked at Taylor. “I guess that means no night markets.”

“I’m heartbroken,” Taylor replied. She put an omelet on her plate, then came over and sat next to me.

“No going outside at all,” Ben said. “They will be looking for Americans. And you look like Americans.” He looked at Abigail. “Especially you. Your hair is *very* light.”

Jack ran his fingers through it. “And *very* pretty.”

“Thank you,” Abigail said.

I noticed Nichelle staring at Jack. She saw me looking at her and turned away.

Ben said, “We need to go over our plans.”

“We need Zeus and Tessa,” I said.

“I’ll get them,” Ian said.

We cleared off the table and Ben laid out a map he’d drawn of the Taiwanese coastline near the Starxource plant.

“We’re back,” Ian said, walking toward us with Zeus and Tessa.

“What’s up?” Zeus asked.

“We’re going through our rescue plan,” I said.

We all gathered around the table. Ben leaned over his map. “This is the plant,” he said, touching a pen to the paper. “The *Volta* will likely anchor here.” He drew a small rectangle to represent the boat. “That means the Elgen will transport YuLong maybe about here.” He ran the pen in a straight line between the plant’s dock and the *Volta*. “If the sea is calm, to go that distance will take only two or three minutes. If we wait until they leave the dock, we can catch their boat halfway.” He drew an X between the *Volta* and the shore. “That means we need to be about ninety seconds away from the middle point. I think we should wait with our boat here.” He touched a spot on the shore opposite the plant.

“That’s by the coast guard base,” Ostin said.

“Yes,” Ben replied. “Very close.”

“That won’t work. We’re going to be in one of their boats. They’ll see us,” Ostin said.

“He’s right,” I said. “We’ll have to capture the coast guard boat before the *Volta* docks, but we don’t know how long the Elgen will wait to transport Jade Dragon. If the Elgen delay, the coast guard will know something is wrong and send their boats out looking for us.”

Ostin looked at the map. He ran his finger in a circle around the *Volta*. “Assuming the coast guard boat can do at least forty knots, to intercept in ninety seconds, we could be anywhere in this radius.”

“Yes,” Ben said.

“Then how about here?” He drew an X in the ocean behind the *Volta*.

“Hide behind the *Volta*?” Zeus said.

“Why not? Neither the Elgen nor the coast guard will be able to see us.”

“But the *Volta* will.”

“The *Volta* won’t think anything of it. They’ll be taking orders from the Elgen inside the plant.”

I looked at the map. “That would allow us to stay out longer.” I turned to Ostin. “But if they can’t see us, how will we see them?”

“Ian could see them,” Abigail said.

“I should be closer,” Ian said. “I get some electrical interference from the plant. I could miss something.”

“What if some of us hike up to where we were the last time Ben took us?” Ostin said. “When the Elgen are ready to move, we’ll radio the boat.

Then they'll speed in and intercept the transport halfway between the shore and the *Volta*, where it's most vulnerable."

"That could work," Jack said.

"Who will be on the boat?" Taylor asked. "And who will be on land?"

I thought about it a moment, then said, "Taylor, Ben, Zeus, Tessa, Nichelle, and Jack should be on the boat."

Zeus dropped his head. "You know I hate boats."

"I know, but we'll need your firepower. With Tessa near you, you'll be able to take out a few Elgen boats if things go south."

"I'll go," he said, "but I don't have to like it."

"Great, because you'll be in charge."

"You won't be with us?" Taylor said.

"No. They'll need me on land. I'll take Ian, McKenna, and Ostin up the coast. Ian will be able to tell us when they're ready to transport. If we encounter Elgen, McKenna and I can protect the group."

"Shouldn't I be with you?" Nichelle asked. "In case they send the Glows?"

"No," I said. "It's more likely they'll put the Glows on the transport with Jade Dragon."

"If Quentin is there he could shut down our coast guard boat before it can escape," Ostin said. "We'll be sitting ducks."

I looked at Nichelle. "You'll have to shut the Glows down first."

"I can do that," she said.

"We'll need radios," I said to Ben.

"I can get those."

I looked around the table. "What do you think?"

"What about me?" Abigail asked.

"You want in?"

She looked insulted. "What, you think I'm worthless?"

"No, your powers just aren't ..." I searched for the right word. "*Aggressive.*"

"Neither are Ostin's," she said.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that," Ostin said.

"At least I *have* powers," she mumbled.

"You come with us," Jack said.

I continued, "After we stop the transport boat, Taylor, with Tessa's help, reboots everyone while Jack and Zeus go on board, grab Jade Dragon, and

bring her back to our boat.”

“What if they’re wearing mindwave helmets?” Taylor asked.

“Then it will be easier for me to shock them,” Zeus said. “Those helmets of theirs make great conductors.”

I looked at Ben. “Where do we go after we have her?”

“There is a small dock here,” Ben said, pointing to a spot on the map. “It is south, around the rocks from the coast guard. We can dock there.”

“Okay,” I said. “As soon as you have Jade Dragon, we’ll leave our point here, drive down and pick you up, then drive back to the safe house.”

“Who’s going to drive?” Taylor asked. The question stung a little. Usually it would have been Wade.

“I’ll drive,” McKenna said. “I learned at the academy.” Then she added, “Before purgatory.”

“McKenna drives,” I said. I looked around the table. “Are we good?”

Most everyone was nodding.

“That’s a plan,” Ostin said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s just hope it works.”

* * *

A few minutes after our meeting, Ian and I took Ben aside.

“We need to tell you something,” I said. “In private.”

Ben’s expression fell, mirroring ours. “We can go downstairs.”

After we were alone in the garage I shut the stairwell door behind us, then said, “We need to warn the voice that the Elgen might know where the ranch is.”

He looked back and forth between us. “How would they know?”

“Because I told them,” I said.

Ben looked stunned. “Why did you tell them?”

I felt like a fool. “After they captured us ...” I shook my head. “I thought Hatch was my father. He asked where my mother was. And I told him.”

Ben looked even more distraught. “I don’t understand. Why did you think Hatch was your father?”

Ian stepped in to defend me. “It’s not Michael’s fault,” he said. “Tara can do things to your brain. She made Hatch look like Michael’s father. Michael didn’t know.”

Ben nodded slowly. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him that the ranch was three hours away from Los Angeles.”

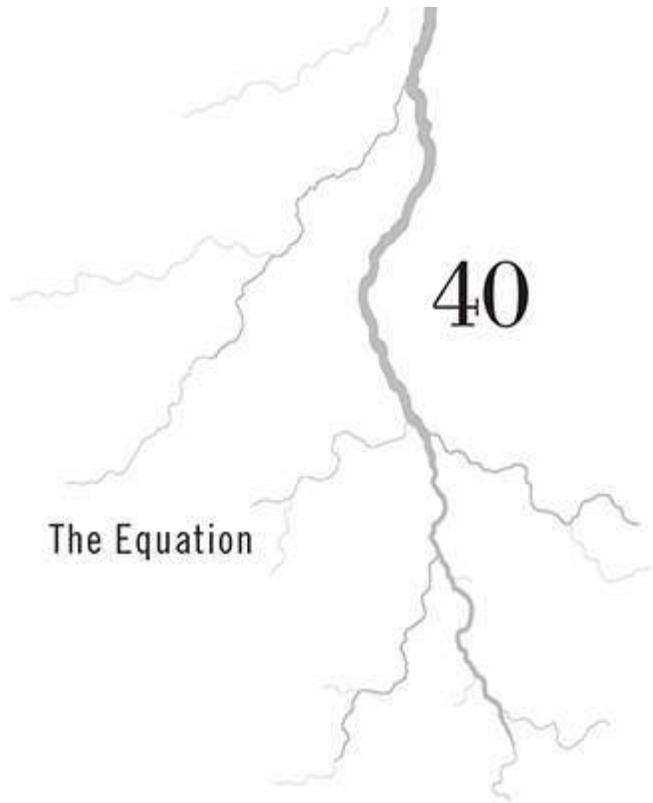
“That is all?”

“And I told him the weather.”

He thought for a moment, then said, “I will tell the voice.”

I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I’m sorry. I’m really worried. I don’t know what else to do.”

Ben looked into my eyes then said, “There is a Chinese saying. If a problem has a solution, to worry is no use, for in the end it will be solved. If a problem has no solution, there is no reason to worry, because it cannot be solved.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “We do not have time to worry. For now we have other things to use our minds for. We need to rescue Jade Dragon.”



That evening, as Taylor and I were finishing our shift on lookout, I told her what I'd told Ben. She tried to comfort me.

"It will be okay," she said. "America's a big place. That's not enough information to find them. Three hours away could be like Kansas. Or Nebraska." She put her arms around me and held me.

After we parted she smiled and said, "Besides, remember what your mother says. Things have a way of working out."

"You're right," I said.

After a minute she said, "There's something really important I need to tell you, too."

"What?" I asked.

"I think I can explain it better with Ostin around."

"All right," I said. "Let's go find him."

We climbed down from the roof and found Ostin sitting next to an oscillating fan in the men's bunk room. He was translating a Chinese magazine into English.

"Hey," I said. "We need to talk."

He looked up, his eyes wide. "What did I do?"

"You're not in trouble," I said.

"We'll need some paper and something to write with," Taylor said.

Ostin held up his pen and pad of paper. "Already got it."

Taylor walked over and locked the door, then sat down on the bed across from Ostin. "I need to write something."

Ostin gave her his paper and pen. Taylor flipped through the pad to a clean page and began writing. When she was finished she handed it to Ostin.

$$s(t; t_y) = k \frac{Q}{r^2} \hat{r} \int_{R^2} m(x, y) e^{-2\pi i \gamma \left(\frac{G_x x t + \gamma G_y y t_y}{2\pi} \right)} dy dx$$

Ostin looked at it for a moment, then said, "Where did you get this?"

"Jade."

"Can I have my pen back?" Ostin asked. Taylor handed it to him and he began scratching numbers on the paper. After a moment he said, "This is incredible." He looked at Taylor. "Do you understand this?"

"It sounds weird since I barely made it through algebra, but I sort of do." She looked at me. "I mean, I don't think I could explain it to anyone, but it's, like, part of me."

Ostin went back to filling the paper with symbols, numbers, and letters. Every now and then he'd mumble "Whoa," or "Brilliant."

"You understand what that means?" I asked Ostin.

"Most of it. Without understanding the dynamics of the MEI machine, I can't fully understand the formula. But it's the algorithm of the MEI waves. I would have to compare it with the Elgen's information to see the variance, but I guarantee it's different from what the Elgen have been operating from."

"Is this what the Elgen are looking for?" I asked.

Ostin looked at me gravely. "I think so."

For a moment we were all silent as the reality of what we had sunk in. Like $E = mc^2$, this formula could change the world. Or destroy it.

"Burn that paper," I said to Ostin. "Now."

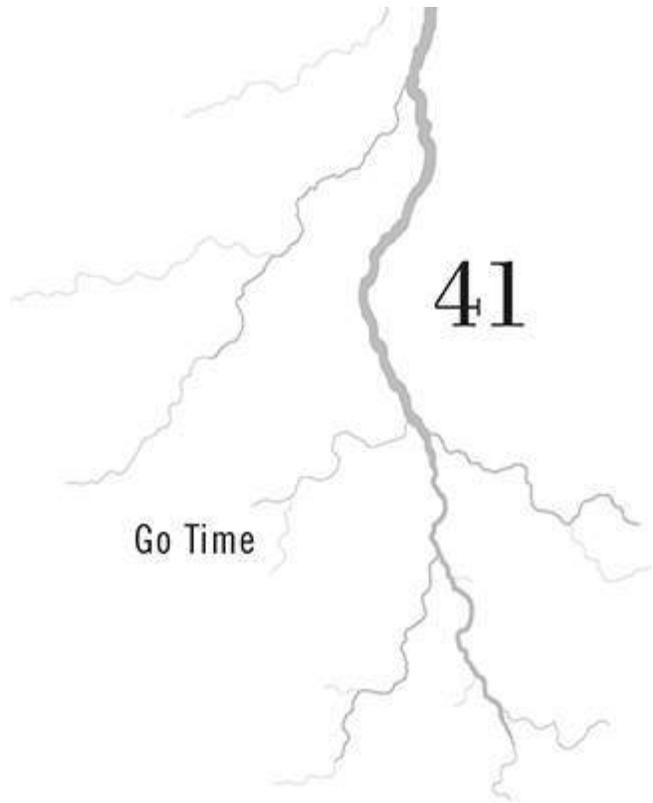
"All right," he said. He walked out to the kitchen.

"Why would she give it to me?" Taylor asked.

"Because she trusts you."

Taylor's brow fell. "But she didn't say it. She only thought it to me. That means she knew I could read her mind."

"It also means that she must know it's what the Elgen want from her," I said. I took a deep breath. "We've got to get her out of there."



The next two days passed uneventfully. We reviewed our rescue plan over and over, anticipating changes and creating alternate escape routes in case something went wrong. Ben was the only one who left the warehouse, and we all took turns watching the streets. We noticed a lot of police and military vehicles in the area.

Ben rented a boat, which he left at the small dock he had told us about. By the afternoon of our third day everything was ready. All we were waiting for was the *Volta* to arrive.

That night, a few hours after we'd gone to bed, Ben flipped on the lights in our bunk room. "It is time."

"Time to *sleep*," Ostin said groggily.

"Time to go," Ben said. "The voice called. The *Volta* is just twenty-five kilometers from the plant."

"Let's go," I said, pulling on my clothes.

Within five minutes we were all gathered downstairs in the garage. In spite of the hour everyone was wide awake. I guess fear will do that.

As we were about to get into the car Ostin said, “There’s one thing we haven’t talked about.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“If we fail, do we sink the boat?”

“You mean with Jade on it?” Taylor asked.

“If the Elgen get that information, millions of people will die.”

We all knew the answer. I looked at Taylor. “Let’s not fail.”

We took a different vehicle than we had before. It was a dark blue windowless van. Ben had observed that the coastal roads were being heavily patrolled, so he took the main roads through Kaohsiung before heading north to our starting point. I sat in the back of the van with Taylor. I hated that we would be separated during the rescue.

As we drove through the dark, Taylor knit her fingers with mine. “Remember our prom?” she said softly.

I smiled sadly. “Yes.”

“I’d rather be there,” she said.

* * *

Less than a half hour later Ben pulled off the highway and drove down smaller and smaller roads that eventually led us to a deserted, tree-lined dock. Ben parked along the road. It was a beautiful night with a full moon reflecting off the calm black sea. There was a light haze over the water, and from the moon’s glow we could see the silhouette of an eighteen-foot powerboat floating alone at the dock. We all got out of the van.

“I can see the *Volta*,” Ian said. “She hasn’t anchored yet.”

“Can you see any activity at the Starxource plant?”

“Not yet.”

Ben handed me a handheld radio. “We are on channel seventeen.”

“Let’s test them,” I said. We turned the radios on. “Can you hear me?”

Ben nodded. “Yes. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” I replied, even though I could have heard him without the radio. I put the radio in my pocket, then looked around. “We’re ready.” I took a deep breath. “We’d better get going.”

Taylor took my hand. I must have looked as afraid as I felt because she said, “Don’t worry, I’ll be back. With Jade.”

“Be careful,” I said.

She smiled and kissed me. “Yeah, right.”

Ben handed McKenna the keys to the van. “You know where to go?”

“You programmed it into the GPS, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then I know.”

Taylor and I hugged one last time, and then I turned to everyone else.

“Good luck. *De oppresso liber.*”

“*Semper fi,*” Jack returned.

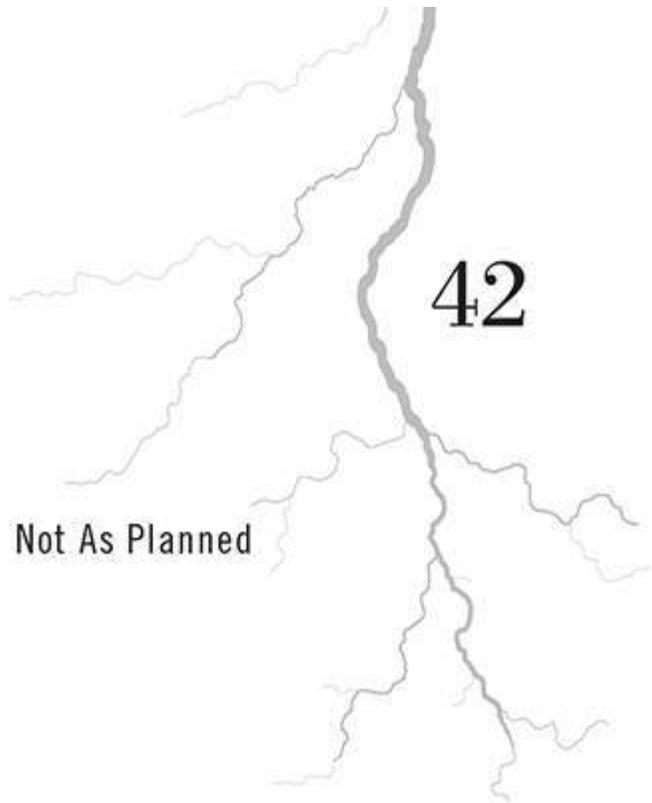
Zeus walked up to me. “Any last instructions?”

“Get the girl. Bring everyone back safe.”

“I’ll do it,” he said. “Anything else?”

I smiled. “Yeah. Stay out of the water.” We man-hugged. “See you soon.”

I glanced over at Jack and he nodded at me. Then the group followed Ben to the boat. Near the dock, Taylor looked back once more. She blew me a kiss, then turned and climbed into the boat. A sick feeling came over me. Something told me I’d never see her again.



As the boat pulled away from the dock, Ostin, McKenna, Ian, and I got back into the van. McKenna started the car while Ostin fiddled with the GPS. Ian and I sat in the seat behind them.

“Everyone ready?” McKenna asked.

“Almost,” I said. I waited until the boat had vanished in the haze, then shut the door. “Let’s go.”

It took us only nine minutes to reach our destination. As McKenna parked along the vacant street, I checked my watch. (I had fixed the time.) It was a little after three in the morning. We waited in the car with the lights off for another twenty minutes; then my radio crackled.

“Can you hear me?” Ben asked.

“Yes. Can you hear me?”

“Yes. We are signaling the coast guard now.”

I turned to Ian. “Any activity at the plant?”

“Some,” he said. “There are trucks and soldiers gathering near the side exit.” He shook his head. “Man, we made a mess of that place. It looks like it was hit by a hurricane.”

“Hurricane Electroclan,” McKenna said softly.

“Can you see a transport boat?” I asked.

“No. The only boat I can see is one of the fishing boats.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Wait,” Ostin said. He opened the glove compartment and brought out a pair of binoculars. “We’ll need these.”

Ian looked around again to make sure no one was watching, then we all climbed out of the van into the dark street. We followed the same path that we had before, creeping along the tree-lined shore. We sat down under the trees, looking out over the moonlit harbor. “There she is,” Ian said. “You might be able to see her; she’s out there.” He pointed nearly directly west out to sea. Through the fog I could see the *Volta*’s faint silhouette. The waves had suddenly kicked up and she was pitching a little.

“That’s not good,” Ian said.

“What?”

“It looks like they’ve rearmed her. She’s got serious firepower.”

Ostin looked out through his binoculars. “They’ve installed M134 Miniguns. Those bad boys can fire four thousand rounds per minute.”

“How far can they shoot?” I asked.

“As far as they want,” he said. “They’re usually mounted to helicopters.”

I thought of Taylor and my stomach churned. “Let’s just hope they think we’re the coast guard.”

“Speaking of which,” Ian said, “there goes the coast guard boat.”

A moment later a twenty-four-foot patroller sped out of the coast guard pier.

“Can you see our boat?” I asked.

“No,” Ostin said.

“They’re about four miles out,” Ian said.

I was on edge. “Just tell me what you see.”

About ten minutes later Ian said, “The coast guard is there.”

We sat quietly. There was a flash of light.

“What was that?”

“Something must have gone wrong. Zeus fired on them.”

My jaw was ticking. “Now what?” I asked.

“They’re bringing their boat alongside the coast guard’s.” Another few minutes passed before Ian said, “They’ve got the coast guard’s boat. They’re driving away.”

Our radio crackled. "This is Ben. We have the boat."

"Did everything go okay?"

"Mostly," he said. "What is our status?"

"The Elgen are preparing to transport. We'll tell you when they leave the plant."

"Okay," Ben said. "Good-bye."

We sat quietly in the dark for another half hour, watching the plant. "This is taking forever," Ostin said from behind his binoculars. "It's like watching grass grow."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. But they now have three different trucks." He looked at me. "It's one girl. Why do they need three trucks?"

Suddenly we heard the sound of boat motors coming toward us. "What's that?" I asked.

Ian said, "Speedboats." He paused. "With really big guns."

"How many?"

"Three."

I looked at him. "Three boats? Why would they have three?"

"They're running three boats so we don't know which boat she's on," Ostin said. "That's why they also have three trucks."

We moved farther back into the darkness of the trees as the boats sped by within fifty yards of the shore. It only took them a few minutes to reach the Starxource plant. They pulled back on their throttles and idled about a hundred yards from the dock.

"Where's our boat?" I asked.

"It's about two miles out," Ian said. "Behind the *Volta*."

"How are we going to stop all three boats?" McKenna asked.

"We can't," I said. "We better let them know what's going on." I lifted my radio. "Ben, this is Michael."

"I am here."

"We've got a problem. They have three boats."

"Three?"

"Yes. And they're speedboats. You're going to have to come closer than we planned."

"Okay," he said.

"No one's moving," Ostin said. "Makes you wonder what they're waiting for."

There was suddenly a staccato series of light flashes coming from the *Volta*.

“Interesting,” Ostin said. “They must be afraid that we’ll intercept their radio signals so they’re using light signals.”

“Anyone can see those,” I said.

“I know. But no one knows Morse code anymore.”

“Do you?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “I knew Morse code by the time I was five.”

He watched for a moment, then said, “Someone read what I spell out ... a-d-y-f-o-r-r-e-c-e-p-t-i-o-n-o-f-p-a-c-k-a-g-e.”

“Ady, for reception of package,” McKenna said.

“*Ready* for reception of package,” I said, looking at Ostin. “They must mean Jade Dragon.”

The three boats suddenly powered to the Elgen dock. They tied up on the near side of the fishing boat.

“This isn’t going to be as easy as we thought it would be,” Ostin said.

“Who thought this was going to be easy?” I said.

“How are we going to stop all three boats?” McKenna repeated.

“We don’t have to,” Ostin said. “There’s only one girl. Ian can tell us which one she’s on.”

“The trucks are moving,” Ian said.

I looked at Ian. “Which truck is she in?”

He looked for a moment, then said, “The first one. Wait.” He turned to me. “I don’t believe it.”

“What?”

“There’s one on every truck.”

I looked at him quizzically. “One what?”

“Girl. I don’t know which one she is.”

“They knew you would be watching,” I said. “They outsmarted us.”

The radio crackled. “Hey, Michael, it’s Zeus. Ben said there are three boats. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Which one is Jade Dragon on?”

“We don’t know,” I said.

“They’re loading the girls onto the speedboats,” Ian said.

“There’s a girl on each of the boats. They have three girls,” I said.

“Three girls?”

“It’s a decoy.”

“What do we do?” Zeus asked.

“Give me a second,” I said.

“That’s about all we have,” Ian said. “They’re untying.”

Taylor came on. “Should we take a chance on one of them? A one-out-of-three chance is better than nothing.”

“It’s too dangerous. The other speedboats are armed,” I said. “Between them and the *Volta* they’ll blow you out of the water.”

Zeus came back on. “Michael, we keep getting radio calls from the coast guard. We can’t hold out much longer. Do we go or abort?”

“Give me a second,” I said again. I looked back at Ostin, who was silently looking through his binoculars at the dock. “Dude, what are you looking at?”

“That fishing boat,” he said calmly.

“We’re a little busy for that right now. Come on, we need your help.”

Ostin was unaffected by my panic. “He’s been there too long.” He rubbed his chin. “And he’s not unloading fish.” Ostin looked over at me. “I know which speedboat she’s on.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“None of them,” he said. “It’s a shell game. The Lung Li are about deception. The three boats are the shells; the fishing boat is the magician’s hand. As soon as the other boats leave, they’ll load Jade Dragon onto the fishing boat and transport her to the *Volta*.”

“A shell game?”

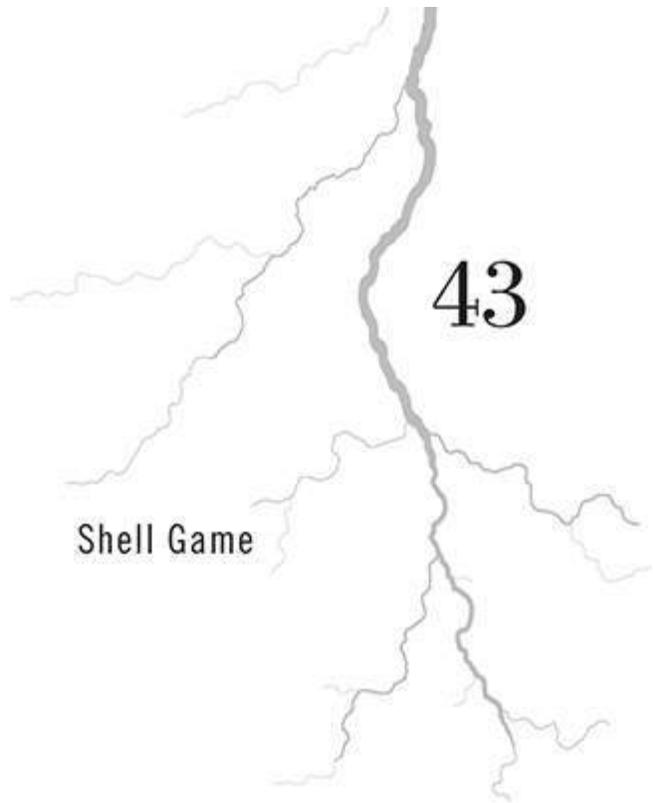
“Just like in the night market.”

“But the speedboats are faster and armed.”

“Exactly. They’re there as decoys. If we don’t fall for it, they’ll return and protect the fishing boat.”

The first of the three speedboats left the dock.

“I hope you’re right,” I said. “Because this will be over soon.”



“Look,” Ostin said. “The fishing boat is unmooring.”

“Can you see anyone on board the fishing boat?” I asked Ian.

“I see five guards.” He looked at me and smiled. “And three Glows.”

“I told you,” Ostin said.

“We’ve got them,” I said. “Hatch wouldn’t send his Glows out fishing at three in the morning.”

I lifted the radio. “This is Michael, can you hear me?”

“This is Zeus.”

“Jade Dragon isn’t on any of the speedboats. She’s on the fishing boat.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. And there are Glows on board. Tell Nichelle to be ready. And be careful, the speedboats are armed. As soon as they know you’re not the coast guard, they’ll attack.”

“Got it.”

“There she goes,” Ian said. “The fishing boat is pushing out.”

“On our way,” Zeus said.

“I have an idea,” Ostin said. “I’m going to send the *Volta* a message.”

“How?”

“With McKenna,” he said. He turned to her. “I need you to flash your hand. If I say ‘dash,’ hold the light for about one second; when I say ‘dot,’ just flash quickly. Ready?”

McKenna nodded. “Yes.”

“First letter. Dot, dot, dash.”

“Just one letter?” I asked.

“*U* is an abbreviation for danger,” Ostin said, his gaze fixed on the boat. There was a sudden flash back. “They got the message. Okay, here we go.” Ostin began rattling off a series of dots and dashes staggered with occasional pauses.

After he finished I asked, “What did you say?”

“I said they’re under attack and to defend themselves against the three boats.”

Suddenly the sound of the *Volta*’s machine guns filled the air. The first speedboat burst into flames. People began jumping overboard.

“Freaking genius,” I said.

“They’ve hit the second speedboat,” Ian said.

“I’m totally going to kiss you on the lips when this is over,” McKenna said to Ostin.

Ostin pumped his fist.

“And there goes the third,” Ian said.

“And there we are,” Ostin said, looking through his binoculars.

Our coast guard boat appeared through the haze about a hundred yards north of the *Volta*, headed straight for the fishing boat.

We heard the sound of Ben speaking over the boat’s PA system, and the fishing boat slowed as the coast guard boat pulled up to its side. There were at least a half dozen flashes of electricity.

“Zeus just took out the guards,” Ian said. Then a large smile crossed his face. “Jack has Jade Dragon. They’re back on board.”

The nose of the coast guard boat rose as it sped north up the coast

“They’re going in the wrong direction,” McKenna said.

Ostin lowered his binoculars. “They’re putting distance between them and the *Volta*’s guns. They’ll head out to sea, then turn south and head to our dock.”

“Let’s go get them,” I said.

* * *

McKenna drove the van as close to the dock as she could, climbing the curb onto a dirt landing less than thirty yards from the water.

“Keep it running,” I said. We opened all the doors. “Where are they?”

“They’re coming,” Ian said.

It was only a few more minutes before the rest of us saw the boat powering full speed into shore.

“He’s got to slow down,” McKenna said.

“I don’t think he’s going to use the dock,” Ostin said.

Ben slowed just slightly before grounding the boat completely up on the shore. Everyone jumped off the port side of the boat and sprinted toward us. Jack was carrying a little Chinese girl. We had rescued Jade Dragon.



“You drive!” McKenna shouted to Ben as he reached the van.

Everyone piled in, more panicked than celebratory. We had no idea how close the Elgen were, but knowing them, they weren’t far.

I slid the side door shut, then jumped into the front passenger seat. “Go, go, go!”

Ben hit the gas and the van fishtailed a little on the dirt and bounced over the curb, sending up a spray of sparks as he scraped the front of the van on the asphalt. The streets were still vacant, and Ben sped at least eighty miles an hour toward the freeway. The freeway had traffic, and only when we had merged in with the other cars did I breathe out a sigh of relief.

“See anyone following us?” I asked Ian.

“No.”

I looked at Taylor, who held Jade Dragon on her lap. It was hard to believe that such a little girl could generate so much commotion.

“Hi,” I said to her. She didn’t look at me.

“She thinks you’re nice,” Taylor said.

“How do you know that?”

Taylor cocked her head.

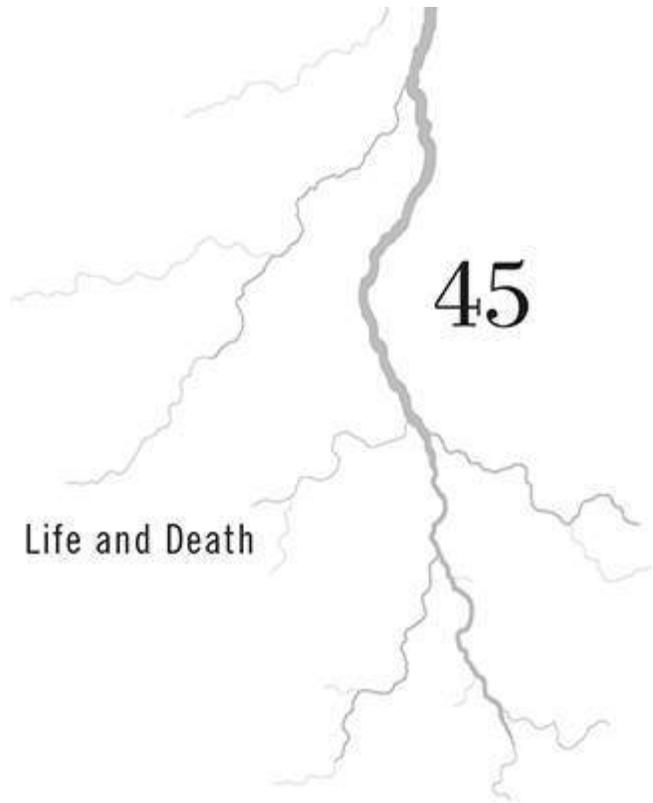
“Sorry,” I said. I looked at Ben. “What are we going to do about those coast guard sailors still in our boat?”

“Do not worry,” he said. “They will find them.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the safe house.”

No one spoke for a moment, then Zeus said, “Does anyone know why the *Volta* blew up her own boats?”



As we drove farther from the plant, the fear-borne adrenaline that had pumped through our bodies dissipated, replaced by an equally potent measure of exhaustion. Ostin even gave the phenomenon a name before falling asleep: *postmission fatigue*.

As we entered Kaohsiung only Ben, Jack, Taylor, and I were still awake, and Ben looked as if he might doze off at the wheel. Taylor's eyes were heavy but fixed on the child she cradled in her arms.

"What's the plan now?" I asked Ben.

Ben unsuccessfully attempted to avert a yawn. "This afternoon I will drive Jade Dragon to the Taitung airport."

"That soon?" Taylor said.

"The more soon the better," he said. "The plane will be waiting. I will go after I sleep. I am too tired to drive now."

"I can help drive," Jack said.

"No," Ben said. "Only me and Jade Dragon will go. The police and army and Elgen spies will be looking for Americans. There may be road stops."

“Roadblocks,” I said, immediately scolding myself for correcting his English. “Are they flying her back to China?”

“No, they fly to America.”

“What about her parents?” Taylor asked.

“The Lung Li kill her parents.”

Taylor gasped. I figured that if Taylor didn’t know they had been killed, Jade Dragon must not have known either. My stomach knotted as I glanced at Taylor, then back at Ben. “Where will she go? The ranch?”

“No,” Ben said. “Someplace secret where they will find a family for her.”

Taylor looked down at the sleeping child in her arms. “You poor sweet thing,” she said softly. She looked up. “My parents would take her. I was adopted.”

“Your home would not be safe,” Ben said.

“I know.” Taylor gently brushed her finger over Jade Dragon’s cheek. I noticed that her eyes were welling up with tears. “I wish I could keep you, sweetheart.”

* * *

We arrived at the warehouse as the sun peeked out over the horizon, illuminating the grounds in a pink-golden hue. I unlocked the gate and Ben pulled in past the fence, then into the warehouse. Once inside, we woke everyone.

“Do we need a lookout?” I asked, wondering if it was even possible.

“I think we are all too tired,” Ben said. “I will set the alarms. We all should sleep now. We will soon have more to do.”

As we climbed out of the van, Ben walked over to the garage door and manually slid a bolt through its track, then pushed some buttons on a metal control pad on the wall.

Following Taylor, I carried Jade Dragon up to the women’s sleeping quarters.

“Lay her next to me,” Taylor said, pushing two cots together. I laid Jade Dragon down on the bed, then Taylor lay down next to her. She gently kissed her forehead, then looked up at me and whispered, “Isn’t she beautiful?”

I nodded. I was amazed at the bond the two of them had created in such a short time. I didn’t know exactly what had happened between them, but

whatever it was, it was probably too profound for someone who had never entered someone else's mind to understand—especially a mind as unique as Jade Dragon's. After a few minutes I said, "I'm going to get some sleep. Do you need anything?"

"No," she said. "Thank you."

"Sleep well."

As I turned to go she said, "Michael." I turned back around. Taylor was smiling. "We got her. Just like you said we would."

I smiled back. "Yeah, we did."

* * *

After leaving the room, I stopped in the kitchen for a cup of water, then went to the men's sleeping quarters. The room was dark with the lights out and the blinds drawn. The only illumination was the faint glow of Ian's and Zeus's skin. As far as I could tell everyone was already asleep except for Jack, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to his cot, half-concealed in shadow. His chin was up as if he was meditating. I lay down on the cot next to him.

Without looking at me he said, "What a rush."

"That's for sure."

He was quiet for a moment, then, still looking forward, said softly, "Wade would have liked Taiwan." One corner of his mouth rose in an amused half smile. "He would have wanted to learn how they make those dumplings we had." He looked up at me. "Did you know that he wanted to be a chef?"

"No."

"He was always afraid someone might find out. Sometimes I'd catch him watching those cooking shows on the Food Network. I used to make fun of him." His smile fell. "I wish I hadn't."

"He knew you were just teasing him."

"I know." Jack looked down for a moment, then back at me. "Do you believe that some part of us lives after we die?"

"You mean like a soul?"

He nodded. "Yeah, something like that."

"I think so. Why?"

"Just after the guards beat me up, I was lying there on the floor, bleeding and in pain, when I felt like someone touched me. I looked up and for just a

split second, I thought I saw Wade.” He rubbed his hand over his face. “I dunno. Maybe I was just delirious. They’d just hit me in the head a dozen times.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve heard of things like that.”

“Do you ever feel your dad near?”

My cheek began ticking. “No. Never.”

“Sorry,” he said. He was quiet for a moment, then said, “You should sleep.”

“You too,” I said.

“I will in a second. I just need to unwind a little.”

I lay back on my bed. What Jack had said echoed in my mind. *Why haven’t I ever felt my father like that?*



I woke to the bleating of an alarm. I jumped out of bed, my heart pounding fiercely, before realizing that it was just the alarm clock that Ben had set.

“Sorry,” Ben said as he shut it off.

“Is it time?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I’ll go with you,” I said.

“No, I must go alone.”

“I just meant to get her.”

He slightly bowed. “*Dwei buchi*. Sorry.”

I followed him over to the women’s quarters. We quietly opened the door, letting a sliver of light into the darkened room. Everyone was asleep except for Jade Dragon, who was sitting facing the door, her legs hanging over the bed, not touching the floor. She looked as if she was expecting us.

Ben mouthed something to her in Chinese. She nodded, glanced at me, then reached over and touched Taylor. Taylor rolled over but didn’t wake.

I sat down on the side of Taylor's cot and gently shook her. She woke from a dead sleep. "What?"

"It's me," I said.

She looked at me through half-closed eyes. "Michael ..."

"It's time for Jade Dragon to leave," I said.

It took only a few seconds for my words to sink in. "Oh," she said, sitting up. She looked over at Jade Dragon as tears welled up in her eyes. Jade Dragon took her hand. Without explanation, Taylor suddenly closed her eyes as if in a trance.

After a minute I said, "Taylor ..."

"Shhh," she said.

For several minutes the two of them sat perfectly still. Then Taylor's eyes opened. "She understands. She knows she's going away without her parents." She looked at me. "She can go now."

Taylor held Jade Dragon's hand as the four of us walked downstairs to the van. Ben unbolted the garage door while I opened the van door and Taylor seat-belted Jade Dragon in behind the driver's seat.

"Keep her safe," Taylor said to Ben.

"I will," Ben said.

"When will you be back?" I asked.

"Maybe tonight. After she is gone I will talk to the voice. If I am too late I will stay in Taitung with friends and come back early tomorrow."

"When will we fly back?"

"I will ask the voice. It will take a few days for the plane to return. Maybe in three days. Until then no one must go out." He looked at me uneasily and I sensed that he was still shell-shocked from our last careless venture out. "It is very, very dangerous. *Fei chang, fei chang* dangerous. No one can go out for any reason."

"I promise," I said. "No one will leave the building."

He turned the ignition and the van started. "I will be back soon."

Taylor leaned forward and kissed Jade Dragon on the cheek. "*Dzai jyan*," she said.

A tear fell down Jade Dragon's cheek. Taylor wiped her own eyes, then shut the van door as the garage door opened. I gave Ben a half wave, then he looked over his shoulder and backed the van out of the garage. The door shut behind him.

"I wish we were going with them," Taylor said.

“I know, but Ben’s right. It’s safer for him to go alone.” I took Taylor’s hand. “Are you still tired?”

“Yes. But I don’t want to go back to bed or I won’t sleep tonight.”

“Want to go up to the roof?”

She smiled. “Sure.”

I took her hand and we climbed the stairway three stories to the top of the warehouse. The stairwell’s last door let out onto a flat tar-and-gravel roof with occasional vents that rose like tin mushrooms. Near the western edge of the roof, facing the harbor, was a telescope, several plastic chairs, and some faded, green-and-white-striped vinyl cushions from an outdoor sofa. It was a beautiful, clear day with only a few cotton-puff clouds, and we could see the sun’s glimmering light on a sea stretching out past the Earth’s gradual curve. After we settled down on the cushions Taylor said, “So now what?”

“Back to the ranch,” I said.

“And after that?”

I looked up to the blue sky, then said, “We retire.”

I could feel Taylor’s eyes on me. “Are you serious?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately. We’ve shut down the academy and two power plants, and sank the *Ampere*. We rescued Jade Dragon. I think we’ve done our share.” When she didn’t say anything I looked over at her. She looked stunned.

“You want to disband the Electroclan?” she said.

“Break up the team? No. Just retire our jerseys.”

Taylor smiled. “Did you really just use a sports metaphor?”

“I’m full of surprises.”

“Especially this one,” she said. “Retiring the Electroclan.”

“I’m not saying good-bye to everyone. I just think it’s time we got on with our lives.”

“You know we can’t go back to Idaho. The Elgen will just hunt us down.”

“I know. It will have to be one of those witness protection things.”

“You mean where they change our identities and move us to a different city?”

“Exactly.”

“What would we do?”

“Finish school. Go to college. Be normal and boring.”

Taylor sighed. “Boring sounds nice. You know, I’d like to live on a ranch. Someplace rustic. Maybe even without electricity.”

“No electricity,” I said. “That counts me out.”

She smiled. “You’re the one exception.” She looked out over the horizon, her gaze following a squadron of pelicans. “I’ve always wondered what I would do for a living.”

“Think about it,” I said. “With your powers, you could be the greatest negotiator the world has ever known. You could be, like, Secretary of State.”

“Not to mention the greatest mother,” she said. “My kids would never lie to me.”

“I’m sure they’d still try,” I said. “They just wouldn’t get away with it.” I breathed deeply. “I’m ready for our future.”

For a moment Taylor looked content; then her smile fell. “What about the Elgen?”

“It’s going to be a long war,” I said. “Maybe someday we’ll return to it.”

She looked at me quietly, then said, “Michael, why do you really want to retire?”

I didn’t answer for a moment, then said, “How do you read my thoughts without even touching me?”

“That’s just being a girl.”

I looked down for a moment. “This morning when I left you on that boat I didn’t think I would see you again.” My eyes welled up. “I can’t go through that again.”

She took my hand. “You would leave the cause for me?”

I looked at her, then said, “You are my cause.”



We stayed on the roof for several hours, though at least an hour of it was spent sleeping. When we finally went downstairs everyone was in the kitchen. Jack and Zeus were playing knuckles, and Nichelle was at the stove cooking something in a wok.

“It smells good,” Taylor said. “What is it?”

“Fried rice,” Nichelle said. “The chef at the academy taught me how to make fried rice when I was eight. It’s the only thing I can cook besides toast.” She grimaced. “And tacos.”

“For the record, I was sous chef,” Abigail said.

“Where have you been?” Ostin asked me.

“On the roof,” I said.

“I told you,” McKenna said.

Taylor and I both sat down at the table.

“As long as we’re all here,” I said, “I want to thank everyone. Zeus, you did an amazing job leading the boat attack. You got the job done. And we didn’t even celebrate you two shutting down a Starxource plant by yourselves.”

Zeus smiled. “Thanks, but it was a team thing.”

“And, Ostin,” I said, “once again that huge brain of yours saved our bacon.”

“Bacon is so good,” Ostin said.

“Figuring out the Lung Li’s shell-game trick was brilliant,” Ian said.

“And signaling the *Volta* to blow up her own boats was genius,” McKenna added. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “But then, you are a genius.”

Ostin turned bright red. “*Nali*,” he said.

“No idea what that means,” I said. “But thanks again.”

Before Ostin could explain, Taylor said, “I have something to say.” She looked at me. “Michael will never say ‘I told you so,’ so I’m going to say it for him. On the way here everyone thought he was crazy when he told us we were picking up Nichelle. But he was right.” Taylor looked at Nichelle. “I trusted Michael when he said that we had to work with you, but I never thought I would be able to forgive you for what you did to me. But you were the only one who knew I’d been kidnapped and you risked your life to save me. Thank you.”

Nichelle was suddenly emotional. When she could speak she said, “You’re welcome.”

“It’s a good thing you were with us on the boat,” Tessa said. “The Glows would have had us. Quentin would have shut down our boat so we couldn’t get away, and Torstyn would have melted our brains.”

“I know I was hard on you,” Ian said. “But I’m glad you came.”

Nichelle stopped stirring the rice. “What was I going to do?” she said. “It was this or the taco stand.”

“So once you get paid, where do you want to go?” I asked.

“I haven’t given it much thought,” she said. “I don’t really have any place.” She suddenly looked nervous. “I was wondering if maybe I could hang out with you guys. Join the Electroclan.”

No one spoke for a moment; then Jack said, “We’re down a member. I say we take a vote.”

Taylor looked at me. In spite of what we’d just talked about on the roof, it was no time to discuss retirement. “You’re the president,” she said.

“All right,” I said. “All in favor of making Nichelle—”

“*Inducting*,” Ostin interjected. “All in favor of *inducting* Nichelle ...”

“Great, now you’re correcting *my* English,” I said. “All in favor of *inducting* Nichelle as the newest member of the Electroclan, raise your hand.”

The vote was unanimous. Nichelle smiled broadly. “Thank you for giving me the chance to be someone else.”

* * *

Nichelle’s fried rice was delicious. After dinner, everyone went back to bed except for me. I waited up past midnight for Ben’s return, eventually falling asleep in my clothes. I woke the next morning after the sun had risen and went out to the kitchen. Ostin and McKenna were making pancakes.

“Is Ben back?” I asked.

“Not yet,” McKenna said. “He probably got stopped by traffic.”

Or Elgen, I thought.

The day passed excruciatingly slowly. Ben had said he’d be back early, so by three in the afternoon I thought I would lose my mind. We were sitting around the kitchen table playing cards when I suddenly lost it.

“Where is he? He was supposed to be back by now.”

For a moment everyone was quiet; then Taylor said what we all feared. “You don’t think he was captured, do you?”

“He’s smart,” Abigail said. “They won’t capture him.”

“If he was, we have no way of knowing,” Ian said.

“What if he was?” Tessa asked.

“They’ll torture him to find out where we are,” Zeus answered.

“They could already be on their way,” I said. I looked around the room. “This isn’t good. If he’s not back in two hours, we prepare to leave. If he’s not here by sundown, we leave.”

“What do we need?” Jack asked.

“There are two cars,” I said. “We’ll fill them with rations and weapons. Ostin, you figure out a route.”

“To an airport or harbor?”

“Whatever gets us out of Taiwan,” I said. “You figure out the details.”

“Zeus and I will get the weapons,” Jack said.

“Hold it,” Ian said, suddenly standing. “He’s coming.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Tessa said. “I hate packing.”

Taylor, Jack, and I went downstairs to meet him. Ben pulled in and climbed out of the van, forgetting to shut the garage door.

“The door,” Jack said.

Ben looked at him blankly.

Jack pointed at the open door. “You need to shut the garage door.”

“*Dwei*,” he said. He reached into the van and pushed the remote, then stared at us. He looked pale, like he might faint.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“We must talk,” he said. “With everyone.”

We followed him upstairs and I called everyone into the kitchen. As we gathered around the room, Ben just looked silently at the floor. Taylor glanced at me with a frightened expression.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Taylor was suddenly panicked. “Did they take her?”

Ben looked at her but didn’t speak.

“Did they take Jade Dragon?” she asked.

“No,” Ben said. “Jade Dragon is safe.”

“Then what is it?” I asked.

Ben gripped the back of a chair. “The ranch has been attacked.”

“What?” I said.

“The Elgen have attacked the ranch.” He looked around at all of us, then said, “We do not think anyone survived.”

It was as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room.

“My mom and dad ... ,” Ostin said.

Panic and anger filled my chest. “How do you know this?”

“The voice,” Ben said.

“I need to talk to the voice,” I said.

“You cannot. The voice has gone into hiding. He has been”—he struggled to remember the word—“compromised.”

Compromised. This was my fault. I had told Hatch where the ranch was. I had told him about the voice. I had betrayed my mother and my friends. I had compromised the entire resistance. For nearly a minute I stood there, paralyzed. I looked over at Ostin. His face was red, streaked with tears. “I need to go there,” I said. “I need to see the ranch.”

Ben shook his head. “It is much too dangerous.”

“I don’t care!” I shouted. “I have to see it. I won’t believe until I see it.” I looked around. “No one has to go with me.”

“I do,” Taylor said, wiping her eyes.

“We all need to go,” Jack said, his voice uneven with emotion. “We need to see what they’ve done. If Hatch has done this, I swear on my life, that either he dies or I do. We will avenge them.”

I turned to Ben. “I don’t care how you do it, but get us there. Now!”

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SIMON PULSE / MERCURY INK

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

First Simon Pulse hardcover edition September 2014

Text copyright © 2014 by Richard Paul Evans

Author photo by Debra MacFarlane

Jacket design by Jessica Handelman

Jacket illustration © 2014 by Owen Richardson

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Cover designed by Jessica Handelman

Interior designed by Mike Rosamilia

The text of this book was set in Berling LT Std.

This book has been cataloged with the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4814-2438-7 (hc)

ISBN 978-1-4814-2440-0 (eBook)

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MICHAEL VEY
THE PRISONER OF CELL 25

MICHAEL VEY
RISE OF THE ELGEN

MICHAEL VEY
BATTLE OF THE *AMPERE*

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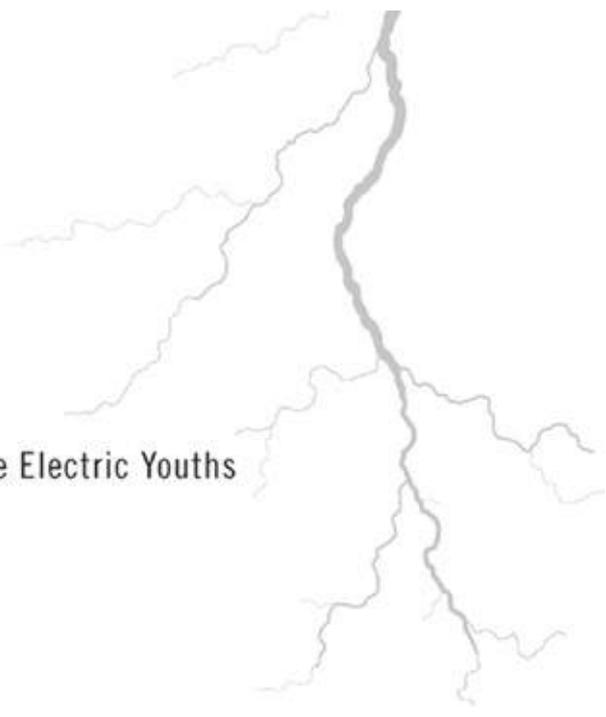
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RICHARD PAUL EVANS

To Kevin Balfe



Dossier: The Electric Youths

Michael Vey

Power: Ability to shock people through direct contact or conduction. Can also absorb other electric children's powers.

Michael is the most powerful of all the electric children and leader of the Electroclan. He is steadily increasing in power, which may be connected to his Tourette's syndrome.

Ostin Liss

Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Ostin is very intelligent, with an IQ of 155, which puts him at the same level as the average Nobel Prize winner. He is one of the original three members of the Electroclan and Michael's best friend.

Taylor Ridley

Power: Ability to temporarily scramble the electric synapses in the brain, causing confusion. She can also read people's minds, but only when touching them.

Taylor is one of the original three members of the Electroclan. She and Michael discovered each other's powers at Meridian High School, which they were both attending. She is Michael's girlfriend.

Abigail

Power: Ability to temporarily stop pain by electrically stimulating certain parts of the brain. She must be touching the person to do so.

Along with Ian and McKenna, Abigail was held captive by the Elgen for many years because she refused to follow Hatch. She joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison known as Purgatory.

Bryan

Power: The ability to create highly focused electricity that allows him to cut through objects, especially metal.

Bryan is one of Hatch's Glows. He spends most of his time playing video games and annoying Kylee.

Grace

Power: Grace is a "human flash drive," able to transfer and store large amounts of electronic data.

Grace was living with the Elgen but joined the Electroclan when they defeated Hatch at the Elgen Academy. She has been working and living with the resistance but has not been on any missions with the Electroclan.

Ian

Power: Ability to see using electrolocation, which is the same way sharks and eels see through muddy or murky water.

Along with McKenna and Abigail, Ian was held captive by the Elgen for many years because he refused to follow Hatch. He joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison known as Purgatory.

Jack

Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Jack spends a lot of time in the gym and is very strong. He is also excellent with cars. Originally one of Michael's bullies, he joined the Electroclan after being bribed to help Michael rescue his mother from Dr. Hatch.

Kylee

Power: Born with the ability to create electromagnetic power, she is basically a human magnet.

One of Hatch's Glows, she spends most of her time shopping, along with her best (and only) friend, Tara.

McKenna

Power: Ability to create light and heat. She can heat herself to more than three thousand Kelvins.

Along with Ian and Abigail, McKenna was held captive by the Elgen for many years because she refused to follow Hatch. She joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison known as Purgatory.

Nichelle

Power: Nichelle acts as an electrical ground and can both detect and drain the powers of the other electric children. She can also, on a weaker level than Tessa, enhance the other children's powers.

Nichelle was Hatch's enforcer over the rest of the electric children until he abandoned her during the battle at the Elgen Academy. Although everyone was nervous about it, the Electroclan recruited her to join them on their mission to save Jade Dragon. She has become a loyal Electroclan member.

Quentin

Power: Ability to create isolated electromagnetic pulses, which lets him take out all electrical devices within twenty yards.

Quentin is smart and the leader of Hatch's Glows. He is regarded by the Elgen as second-in-command, just below Hatch.

Tanner

Power: Ability to interfere with the electrical navigation systems of aircraft and cause them to malfunction and crash. His powers are so advanced that he can do this from the ground.

After years of mistreatment by the Elgen, Tanner was rescued by the Electroclan from the Peruvian Starxource plant and has been staying with the resistance so he has a chance to recover. He carries deep emotional pain from the crimes Dr. Hatch forced him to commit.

Tara

Power: Tara's abilities are similar to her twin sister, Taylor's, in that she can disrupt normal electronic brain functions. Through years of training and refining her powers, Tara has learned to focus on specific parts of the brain in order to create emotions such as fear or joy.

Working with the Elgen scientists, she has learned how to create mental illusions, which, among other things, allows her to make people appear as someone or something else.

Tara is one of Hatch's Glows. She and Taylor were adopted by different families after they were born, and Tara has lived with Hatch and the Elgen since she was six years old.

Tessa

Power: Tessa's abilities are the opposite of Nichelle's—she is able to enhance the powers of the other electric children.

Tessa escaped from the Elgen at the Starxource plant in Peru and lived in the Amazon jungle for six months with an indigenous tribe called the Amacarra. She joined the Electroclan after the tribe rescued Michael from the Elgen and brought them together.

Torstyn

Power: One of the more ruthless and lethal of the electric children, Torstyn can create microwaves.

Torstyn is one of Hatch's glows and was instrumental to the Elgen in building the original Starxource plants. Although they were initially enemies, Torstyn is now loyal to Quentin and acts as his bodyguard.

Wade

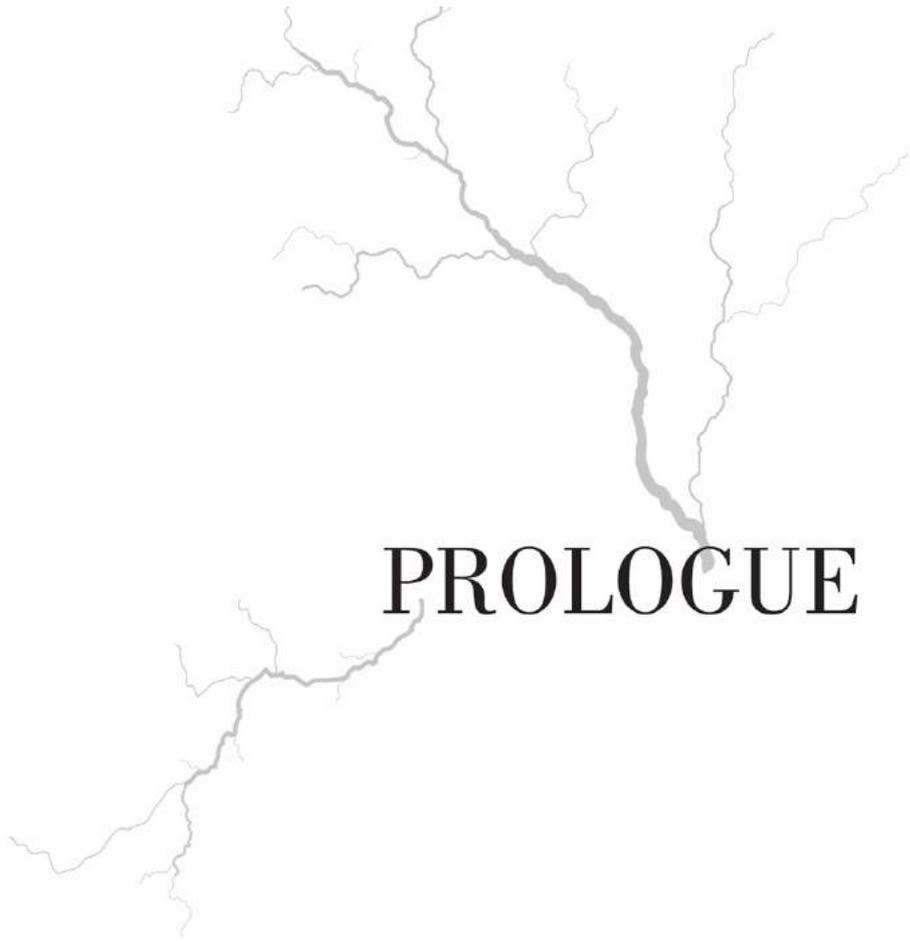
Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Wade was Jack's best friend and joined the Electroclan at the same time he did. He died in Peru when the Electroclan was surprised by an Elgen guard.

Zeus

Power: Ability to "throw" electricity from his body.

Zeus was kidnapped by the Elgen as a young child and lived for many years as one of Hatch's Glows. He joined the Electroclan when they escaped from the Elgen Academy. His real name is Leonard Frank Smith.



PROLOGUE



Elgen radio communications during attack on Timepiece Ranch

“This is Elgen One. All helicopters prepare to commence Mexican Lightning Storm.”

“Elgen One, this is Elgen Twelve. Be advised there are power lines along the south ridge of the compound. All copters stay clear.”

“Copy, Elgen Twelve. Elgen Base, target is in range of missiles. All helos ready to launch Hellfire missiles on command.”

“Roger, Elgen One. Lethal force is authorized.”

“There’s motion on the ground, Elgen One. Enemy helicopter is powering up. Enemy helicopter is powering up.”

“Elgen Six, take out enemy helicopter. All helos let missiles fly.”

“Hellfire missiles away.”

[Massive explosions]

“That’s a beautiful sight, *amigos*.”

“Burn, baby. Burn.”

“How do you say ‘fire’ in Spanish?”

“*Fuego*.”

“I was gonna say ‘habanero,’ Elgen Four.” [Laughter]

“‘Jalapeño,’ Elgen Two.”

"This is Elgen Nine. No report of ground fire."

"Elgen One, this is Elgen Base. One hundred and fifty-four missiles confirmed launched."

[Loud explosions]

"Elgen One, this is Elgen Six. We've hit underground fuel tanks or a weapon cache. The south end of the ranch just rose twenty feet."

"There's a reason they're called Hellfire, Six."

"Any enemy sighted?"

"No, sir."

"Elgen Base, has there been any response from the Mexican air force?"

"Negatory, Elgen One. Skies are clear."

"All helos commence strafing area with fifty caliber."

[Sound of sustained machine-gun fire]

"What are those explosions along the road, One?"

"They appear to be enemy land mines."

"There must be hundreds. The place is jumping."

"Mexican jumping beans, Elgen Nine."

"Elgen One, this is Elgen Three. We are directly above target. All primary targets are destroyed. All secondary targets are destroyed."

"Roger that, Elgen Three."

"Wait, there's motion at two o'clock."

"Elgen Two, RPG at two o'clock! RPG at two o'clock! Firing."

"This is Elgen Two. . . ." [Static]

[Pause]

"Elgen Two is hit. Elgen Two is hit."

[Pause]

"Elgen One, Elgen Two is down."

"Fire on RPG, Three."

"Missile launched."

[Explosion]

"Target is neutralized."

"Elgen Two, do you copy? Elgen Two, do you copy?"

"Elgen One to Elgen Three, what is status of Elgen Two?"

"There's too much smoke to confirm, Elgen One."

"Elgen Two, Elgen Two, do you copy? Repeat, Elgen Two, do you copy?"

"This is Elgen Four. We're dropping down to check on Two."

[Female voice. Automated warning] "Altitude low."

[Sound of explosion]

"Four, pull out. There's unexploded ordnance."

"I think that was just a land mine."

"Too much blast for a land mine, Four."

"Maybe another fuel tank."

". . . Or a weapons arsenal."

"Good of them to provide the ordnance."

"Elgen Three, any response from Elgen Two?"

"Still no response, One."

"Elgen Two, Elgen Two, do you copy?"

"Elgen One, we have a visual. Elgen Two is in flames. There are no signs of survivors."

"Roger that, Elgen Four. Let's seal the site. All helos clear ground, Nine and Eleven fire napalm."

"What about Elgen Two?"

"There are no survivors on Elgen Two. Fire napalm on my command." [Pause] "Fire."

"Elgen Nine. Napalm released."

[Explosion]

"Elgen Eleven. Napalm released."

"Nothing like the smell of napalm in the morning. . . ."

"That is what hell looks like, gentlemen. Let's get out of here before the Mexican air force arrives."

"What's that, a biplane?" [Laughter]

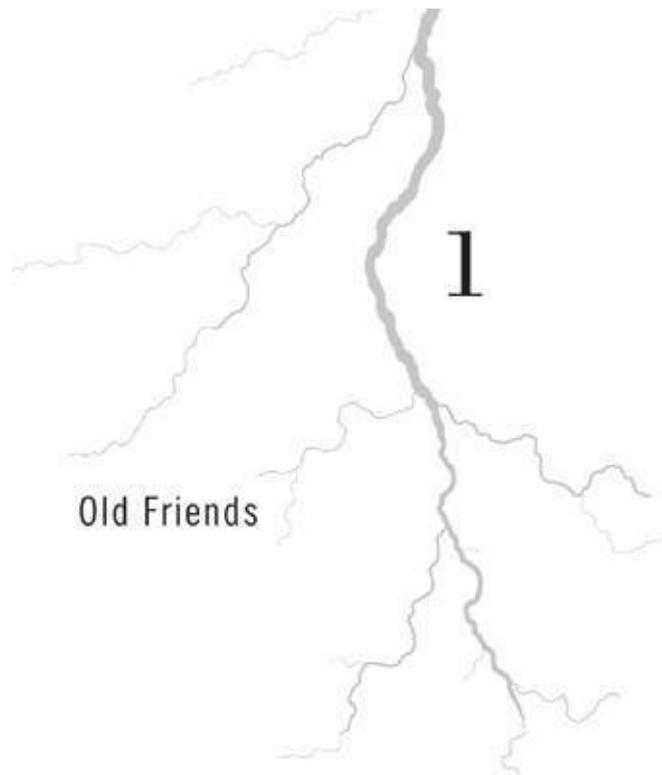
"All helos back to Elgen Base. Elgen Eleven, record damage, then return with fleet."

"Copy, One."

"This is Elgen One reporting to base. Mission accomplished. Target is neutralized. There are no enemy survivors. Repeat, there are no enemy survivors."



PART ONE



Admiral-General Hatch's office Taiwan Starxource plant

It was nearly midnight, and Elite Global Guard Welch stood at attention, his back to the door of Admiral-General Hatch's office. "Sir, we've destroyed the terrorists' home base. The resistance's ranch has been annihilated."

Hatch nodded but continued reading his book. "What have you done with the prisoners?"

"There were no prisoners taken. There were no survivors."

Hatch looked up from his book. "No survivors?"

"We killed every last one of them. After our barrage of missiles, we dropped napalm. I've reviewed the footage. The compound looked like Dresden after World War II. I can provide the video for you if you wish."

Hatch was quiet for a moment. "No, I'll take your word for it." He set down his book, stood, and walked to the side of the room, avoiding eye contact with Welch. "What is the status of the Electroclan? Are they still in Taiwan?" Hatch spoke in a low, threatening voice.

Welch stiffened before replying. "They've escaped, sir."

"Every one of them?"

"Yes, Admiral-General."

"With the Chinese girl?"

"Yes, sir. We believe they have Jade Dragon."

Hatch appeared thoughtful for a moment, then said softly, "You failed me."

Welch swallowed. "Yes, sir."

Hatch said nothing, just slowly nodded. Welch looked at him quizzically. He had expected Hatch to rage, to explode. Instead Hatch's voice was almost mournful, like a jilted lover's. "Is that all you have to report? That you failed?"

Welch did his best to remain stoic. "Yes, sir."

Hatch stared at the ground for a moment, then said, "Okay. You've given me your report."

Okay? Welch was as baffled as he was nervous. He wondered if Hatch were drunk. He had never seen him behave so calmly in the face of failure.

"What is the word on Schema?" Hatch asked. "Has he been captured yet?"

"No, sir. He's vanished."

"Vanished?"

"Even before you left Switzerland. One of our men had him for a while, but he disappeared."

Hatch's brow furrowed. "Who disappeared? Schema or our man?"

"Both, sir."

Again, Hatch seemed unmoved. "It doesn't matter. Schema's inconsequential." He poured himself a drink from a crystal decanter, then downed a shot and poured another. "Would you care for a drink, EGG Welch?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Welch said, his confusion growing. He had expected Hatch's fury. Not a drink.

Hatch poured another shot glass of the caramel-colored liquor and handed it to Welch. "To old times," he said. "And old friends."

"To old friends," Welch repeated.

He drank and quickly put the glass down as Hatch slowly sipped his, looking deep in thought.

"We've been together a long time," Hatch said. "So much has changed since the beginning. The world has changed."

"We have changed, sir. We have grown powerful."

"So we have." After a moment Hatch said, "We've acquired two new ships to replace the *Watt*: the *Edison*, a battle cruiser from Russia, and

the *Franklin*, a Mistral-class amphibious assault ship from France. They are already manned and on their way to Tuvalu, as are the *Ohm*, the *Tesla*, and the *Joule*. They left port six days ago.

“This evening, the *Faraday* and the *Volta* will set sail for Tuvalu. I am flying with EGGs Despain and Bosen to Jakarta to inspect the *Edison*. Then we will fly to Tuvalu for the opening ceremonies of our Funafuti, Tuvalu, Starxource plant. We already have a force of four hundred guards stationed on the island.

“While I am hosting the Tuvaluan dignitaries, the fleet will rendezvous twelve miles from the main island and commence Operation Home Base. If things go as planned—and I expect that they will—we’ll overthrow the island and establish our base. We are going to finish what Vey delayed when he blew up the *Ampere*.”

“You don’t need me to escort you to Jakarta, sir?” Welch asked.

“No,” Hatch said bluntly. “I have a different assignment for you.”

Welch nodded. “And how may I serve my admiral-general?”

Hatch pressed a button on his desk. “As an example.” Four guards stepped into Hatch’s office. “Mr. Politis,” Hatch said calmly. “EGG Welch is officially relieved of his title and command. Strip him of his weapon and insignias and arrest him.”

“Yes, sir.”

Welch paled. “Sir . . .”

Two men took Welch by the arms, removed his sidearm, and handcuffed him. Politis took a knife from his utility belt and cut the EGG and Elgen insignias from Welch’s shoulder and breast. “Now what, sir?” Politis asked.

“Take him to the brig. When we reach the Tuvalu plant, he will be put into the rat bowl.”

Welch shuddered as the realization of Hatch’s pronouncement spread over him.

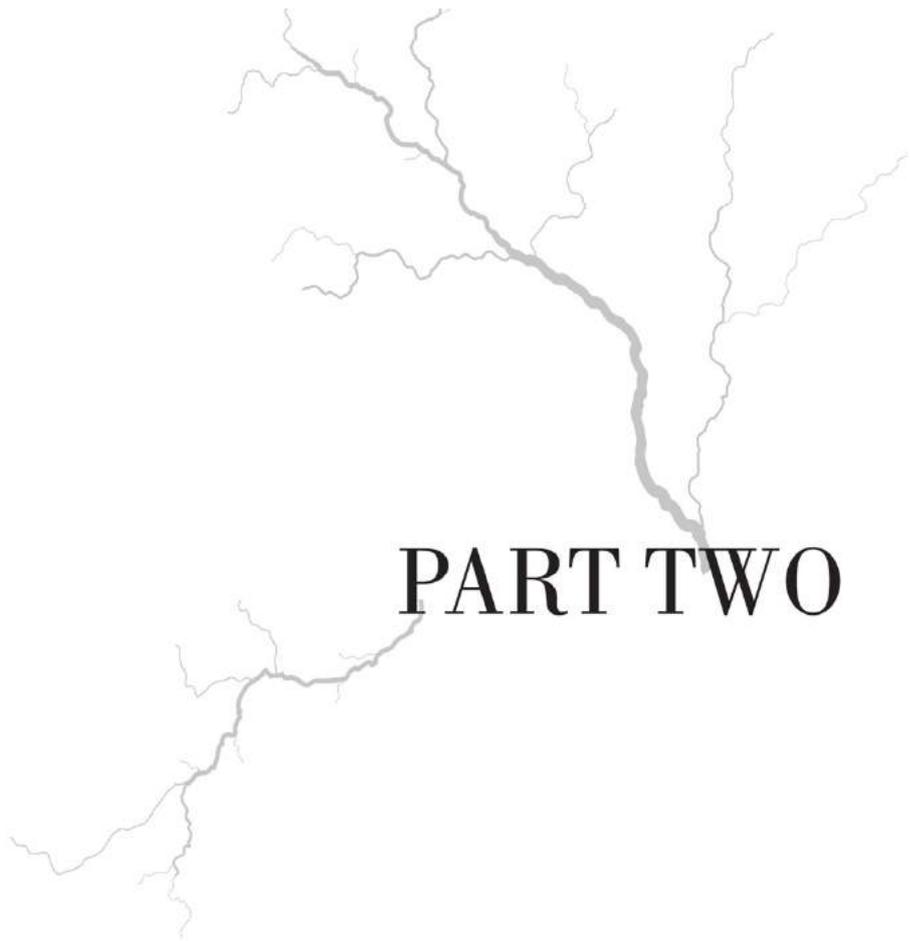
“Yes, sir,” Politis said.

“My General,” Welch said.

“Yes,” Hatch said. “I am still your general. You took a vow to serve me until your death, which is precisely what I am requiring of you now—your death. And in fulfilling this duty, your colleagues will understand that I expect my orders to be carried out, and failure is not an option.” He nodded at Politis.

“Move it,” Politis barked, pulling Welch from the room.

When everyone was gone, Hatch downed the rest of his drink, then poured another. “To old friends.”



PART TWO



My name is Michael Vey. Right now I'm sitting in a private jet, staring at my hand. It's shaking. And it's sparking, which, if you don't know anything about me, might sound a little weird. If you know who I am, then you know I'm electric. Even though the lights are off in the plane, the sparks arcing between my fingers are bright enough to illuminate the plane's fuselage, like strobe lights at a dance club or something. I can't stop it any more than I can stop the twitching from my Tourette's syndrome.

Other than my electricity, it's quiet on the plane. Nichelle got airsick and threw up a couple of hours ago. Earlier, my girlfriend, Taylor, tried to put her arm around me but gave up after I shocked her three times.

I've been getting more electric for some time, but I don't think that's why I'm generating so much electricity right now. I think it's because my electricity is exacerbated by emotion. And at the moment I have so much emotion, I can barely breathe. It doesn't help that I've slept fewer than four hours in the past two days. Everything in my world is raging.

The Electroclan and I are on a flight back to the United States from Taiwan. We just rescued a young Chinese girl named Jade Dragon from the Elgen. We were at a safe house in Taiwan when we learned that Timepiece Ranch, the headquarters of the resistance, had been

destroyed by Elgen forces. The last communication we received from the voice is that there were no survivors.

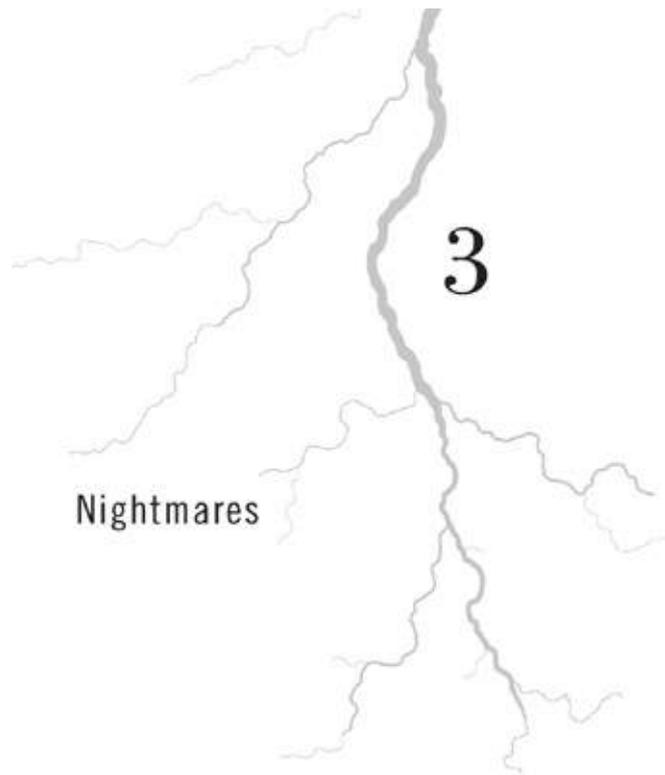
For me this is personal. My mother was at the ranch. I was only eight when my father died. I remember feeling like my world had died with him. The only person who got me through it was my mother. Now she's gone too. I'm an orphan.

Ostin's parents were also at the ranch. Ostin's never lost anyone close to him, not even a goldfish. He's not taking it well, not that he should. None of us are. McKenna, his girlfriend, has stayed close to him. Even Abigail tried to take away his pain, until he made her stop. He said he felt like he was betraying his parents by not suffering. I keep telling him that we don't really know what happened yet, but I'm lying. It's not like the voice would be wrong about something like this. My mother, Ostin's parents, the resistance, are all gone. The Elgen have killed them all.

Our pilots told us that Taylor's mother had flown back to Idaho before the attack. That's good news for now but, I suspect, not for long. The Elgen do not forgive. It's only a matter of time before the Elgen hunt her down as well.

My emotions are revolving like a great wheel, spinning between denial, hope, despair, and rage—the strongest of which is rage. I want to burn Hatch and the Elgen into ashes. If I could turn myself into a massive bolt of lightning and destroy them all, I would. Even if it took me with them.

That's where I am. That's what I'm thinking. That's why I'm sparking so much. I don't know what we'll find back in America. All I know for sure is that the next twenty-four hours will forever change the course of my life.



“What are you thinking?” Taylor asked softly.

“Why don’t you just read my mind?” I said.

“I’d rather you tell me what you want to tell me.”

I turned and looked at her. “Remember our conversation on the rooftop in Taiwan? How I said we were going to retire?”

She nodded sadly. “Yes.”

“I can’t believe how much has changed in just a few days. We’ll never retire. There will never be peace.”

“There could be,” she said. “We can still hope.”

“*Hope* won’t bring my mother back. It won’t bring anyone back.”

“We don’t know for sure if she’s . . .” She couldn’t say the word. “Maybe she escaped. Maybe she had already left before they attacked.”

I took a deep breath and bowed my head. I was afraid to hope. It would only make hearing the truth worse. “If that were true, the voice would have told us,” I said.

“The voice doesn’t know everything,” she replied.

“It hasn’t been wrong yet.”

Ostin came up next to me, crouching in the aisle next to my seat. His eyes were red and swollen. “I’ve got to ask the pilot something,” he said. “I don’t understand how the Elgen could have attacked the ranch

without the U.S. military stopping them. They couldn't have crossed the border without being spotted on radar."

"I'll come with you," I said.

We both walked to the front of the plane. The cockpit door was open.

"Excuse me," Ostin said as we stepped into the small cockpit. "I have a question."

The captain, Scott, quickly turned back. "Whoa, Michael, you need to step back. You're affecting the instrumentation." He turned to his copilot, Boyd. "You take the controls, we're going to step out."

Boyd nodded. "Got it."

We backed out of the cockpit, and Scott followed. He asked Ostin, "What's your question, son?"

"How could the Elgen have attacked a target inside America? Why didn't the U.S. military stop them?"

"The ranch isn't in America," Scott said. "It's in Mexico. The Elgen launched a surprise attack by air through the Gulf of California. They never entered U.S. airspace."

"We were in Mexico?" I asked.

"We were in a remote part of Sonora."

"Mexico," Ostin said. "That's why they were left alone . . ."

"They weren't left alone," I said.

". . . by the government," Ostin said. "How much longer until we land?"

"About four hours. So get some rest. We have some intense days ahead."

"How do we know if the ranch's landing strip is safe?" Ostin asked.

"We don't," Scott said. "We don't even know if the Elgen are still at the ranch. So we're going to land in Douglas, Arizona, on the U.S. side of the border, then drive down. So get some rest."

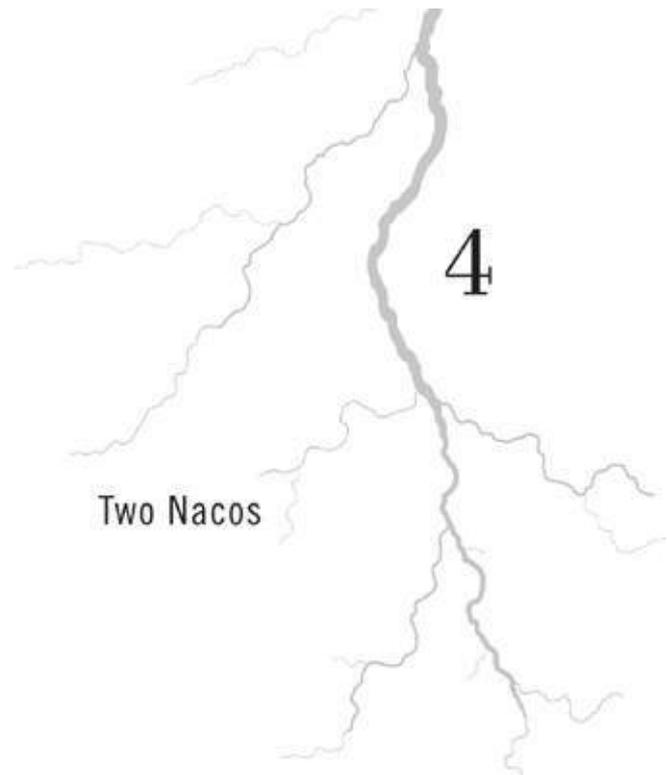
Ostin and I went back to our seats. I don't know why I was so eager to go to the ranch. I guess we don't really accept that someone is dead until we see them. Maybe that's why we have funerals.

I reclined my seat, lay back, and closed my eyes. I suppose my exhaustion was finally greater than my anxiety, because I fell asleep. I woke as we were descending. I looked over at Taylor. She was looking at me.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"About three hours. You were making a lot of noise. Did you have more nightmares?"

“Yes,” I said. “More nightmares. You didn’t look into my mind?”
“No. Your nightmares scare me too much.”



Our plane touched down at the Bisbee-Douglas International Airport a little after five p.m., Arizona time. The wheels screeched on contact with the baked, dusty runway, as if they were in pain.

Even though the airport's proximity to Mexico made it an international airport, the title seemed a bit grandiose for such a tiny, run-down airstrip. In fact, it didn't even look functional.

The airport had just two narrow asphalt runways surrounded by desert and lined with fifty-gallon metal drums, painted white with thick red stripes around their middles. Weeds grew up through the cracks in the runway's tarmac. Around the airfield was an eight-foot-high weathered wire fence that, in places, was covered with tumbleweeds and flanked by short, sunbaked palms.

About a hundred yards from the runway were three arched-roof airplane hangars paneled with corrugated tin. They had rusted metal doors and hardware. There were no glass windows, just portals covered by metal grates.

On top of the closest hangar was a pole that extended up into the air with a wind sock and an instrument (Ostin called it an anemometer) to measure wind speed, though it didn't look like anyone was around to

receive its information. The place looked like it had been built a hundred years ago, back when planes only had propellers.

"Where are we?" Taylor asked.

"Bisbee-Douglas International Airport," Ostin said.

"It looks deserted."

"It ain't Los Angeles," Ostin said.

"It's not even Boise," I said.

The plane came to a stop, then circled back, slowly taxiing toward the hangars. Above the first hangar door, affixed to the corrugated tin siding, was a faded orange logo that read:

APACHE AIRLINES

There was a tribal symbol next to the name.

"That's ironic," Ostin said.

"What's ironic?" I asked.

"It was near Douglas, Arizona, that Geronimo, the last Apache chieftain, surrendered and ended the Indian resistance in the United States."

"Maybe this is where our resistance ends too," Tessa said.

Everyone looked at her.

"You're supposed to enhance our power," McKenna said, "not diminish it."

"Just sayin'."

"No," Jack said. "This is where our resistance begins."

* * *

Partially obscured behind one of the hangars was a faded, aluminum-sided trailer home with a rusted, older-model Yamaha motorcycle parked out front. As our plane powered down, Scott emerged from the cockpit. He opened the door, and a stairway protruded from the plane. "All right," he said. "Everyone off. We have a van in the hangar. I need to get the key; then we'll load up."

Taylor and I were the last to get off the plane. There was a light breeze, and the Arizona air was warm and dry. I stepped down onto the runway, then looked around at the rugged desert landscape that surrounded us. There were cacti and tangled trees with yellow and white blossoms. The air smelled fragrant, like some kind of exotic flower.

"Mexican plums," Ostin said as if reading my mind.

“How do you know all this crap?” Tessa said.

“I read a lot,” he said. Then, with an uncharacteristic edge added, “Can you read?”

Tessa stared him down. “I can’t shock you, but I can still punch you out.”

“Try it,” McKenna said.

“Your girlfriend is protecting you?” Tessa laughed. “How pathetic is that?”

Ostin looked even more pained than he already was. “I didn’t ask for her help.” He looked at McKenna. “I didn’t ask for your help.”

McKenna frowned. “I’m sorry. It just made me mad.”

“Stop it,” I said, looking at Tessa. “There’s enough pain without you adding to it.”

She wilted beneath my gaze. “Sorry.”

As I turned away, Taylor gently touched my back.

“Don’t read my mind,” I said.

“I’m not trying to. But you’re too electric right now. It’s like you’re shouting out your thoughts.”

“Lucky you,” I said.

“I’m sorry. I wish I could help.”

The sky was streaked with orange and yellow as the sun began its descent on the western horizon. Under different circumstances I would have been moved by its beauty, but inside I felt too ugly to appreciate it.

“Nothing out here,” Ian said. “This place is quiet.”

“Is there anyone in the trailer?” Scott asked.

“An old woman,” Ian said. “She’s watching TV.”

“Good,” Scott said. “Good.”

Scott walked off to the trailer while Boyd handed us our bags. As Scott approached, the trailer door was opened by an elderly Mexican woman. They spoke for a few minutes. The woman left for a moment, then returned and handed him something.

Scott took out his wallet, handed her some bills, and walked over to the hangar. He unlocked and unchained the doors, threw them wide open, then disappeared inside. A few minutes later he drove out in an unwashed, navy-blue van that I think was similar in make to the one that had picked us up on our first visit to the ranch.

He pulled up next to us, killed the car, and got out. “We need to pull the plane into the hangar; then we’ll go. Do you all have your bags?”

“Yes,” I said, looking around.

“Go ahead and put them in back. Jack, after everyone gets their bags in, would you mind moving the van? I need to help Boyd store the plane. It’s going to take a little while to lock everything up.”

“No problem,” Jack said, climbing into the driver’s seat.

I was surprised that Jack could move like he did. He was still nursing eleven broken ribs from the Elgen beating him. He hadn’t complained once. He’s the toughest person I’ve ever met.

Boyd raced the plane’s engine as Scott walked in front of the plane to guide it into the hangar.

We finished putting our bags into the back of the van. When we all got in, Jack turned on the radio. It was set to a Mexican talk radio station, and he pushed buttons until some music came on. Then he drove us over to the side of the hangar while Scott and Boyd maneuvered the plane inside.

It took the pilots nearly an hour to get the plane secured. We had gotten bored, so we got back out of the van, looking for something to keep ourselves occupied. For a while, Zeus shot grasshoppers off the metal fence with electric bolts while the rest of us just watched.

“There’s one,” Taylor said, pointing at a large green insect climbing a nearby post.

I made an electric ball and lazily threw it. I missed the grasshopper but caught the weeds in front of it on fire, and we all had to run over and stomp on the flames to put them out. Finally Scott and Boyd emerged from the hangar. They locked the large steel doors, then walked over to the van.

“Sorry that took so long,” Scott said. “Is everyone here?”

“Yes.”

He looked at the patch of burned weeds. “What happened?”

“We were just having a little fun,” Jack said.

“All right,” he said. “Everyone get in.”

“Where are we going?” Taylor asked.

“We’re headed to Bisbee, then down into Naco, where we’ll cross the border.”

“How long will that take?” I asked.

“It’s less than an hour from here.”

“Why can’t we just cross the border right here?” Ostin asked.

“We could, but it’s not as safe. Security is much tighter here. And the town on the other side of the border, Agua Prieta, has undercover DEA agents looking for drug smugglers. No one cares about Naco. Less chance of problems that way.”

“How far is it from Naco to the ranch?”

“About two hours. But we won’t be going tonight. It’s too late.”

“Why is it too late?” I asked impatiently.

Scott looked at me with a stern gaze. “The dirt roads to the ranch are dangerous to drive anytime, but especially at night. And if there are still Elgen around, they’ll see our headlights long before we get there. Hardly anyone goes out that way but us, so if they’re there, they’ll be waiting for us.

“There are also drug cartels operating out of some of those areas. If they mistake us for *Federales*, we’re in trouble. Trust me, it’s best we wait until tomorrow. For now we’ll cross the border into Naco, Mexico, then leave early in the morning.”

“What time will we leave for the ranch?” Tessa asked.

“I think the best time is just before dawn.”

“Just like George Washington attacking Trenton at sunrise,” Ostin said, nodding. “Surprise them while they’re still in bed.”

“We’re not *attacking* anyone,” Scott said. “If the Elgen are there, we pull back.”

“How do we get across the border without passports?” Ian asked.

“It’s not hard getting into Mexico,” Tessa said. “It’s coming back that’s the problem.”

“They’ll still stop us,” Scott said. “People smuggle guns into Mexico. But we’ve got passports for you. We had them made while you were in Taiwan, just in case we needed to fly somewhere else. Now let’s go. We can talk more on the way. I’ll drive.”

Jack handed him the keys, and Scott climbed into the driver’s seat. “Michael, sit up here with me.”

“All right.” I walked around to the front and got in.

Everyone got into the van except for Boyd. “Good luck,” he said to us. “And be careful. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“You’re not coming with us?” I asked.

“No. Someone needs to stay with the plane.”

“*Vámonos*,” Scott said.

I saluted Boyd as we drove off. We took highway 80 northwest to Bisbee, then turned south toward Mexico. The road down from Bisbee led us into a great, sloping plain with the Sierra Madre of Mexico rising ahead of us in the distance.

I soon discovered that there are two Nacos—Naco, Arizona, and Naco, Mexico, the two small towns divided by a twenty-foot-wide gravel road surrounded on both sides by a ten-foot metal fence lined

with razor wire. I couldn't tell if the fence was rusted or had just been painted to look that way. There was an uninhabited border control truck about fifty feet from the crossing.

The town looked deserted, and we didn't see anyone until we reached the border crossing, which was pretty quiet as well. It was a single-lane crossing, and a female Mexican immigration officer with a badge and a khaki uniform sat on a folding chair near the stop sign, smoking a cigarette and looking bored. As Scott had told us, this wasn't a popular crossing. From what I could see, neither of the towns was very large, which I guessed was one of the reasons we'd chosen to cross here.

As we approached the gate, a red light came on, signaling us to stop. The immigration officer stood and walked up to our van. She said with a heavy accent, "May I see your vehicle registration, please? And your passport and credit card."

Scott must have been familiar with the routine, as he already had all the items ready. The officer shone her flashlight back through the van.

"You have many youths," she said to Scott.

"Yes, I do. They're friends."

"What is the purpose of your visit to Mexico?"

"We're here on vacation. I'm chaperoning."

"Just a moment, please."

The officer went into the building. A moment later she returned. "Are you carrying any guns or drugs?"

"No, ma'am."

She looked back at us again, then said, "There is a twenty-seven-dollar fee." Scott counted out some bills and handed them to her. She handed him a clipboard with a form. "Sign here, please."

Scott signed the paper and handed back the clipboard. The officer tore off the top sheet and handed it back to Scott. "Please keep this paper with your vehicle. How long will you be in Mexico?"

"Only a few days," Scott said.

"Okay. You may go."

Scott put the van in gear, and we drove over some weird, shiny metal balls that were imbedded in the asphalt, across the border.

"We're in Mexico," Jack said.

"Mexico," Tessa sighed. "Makes me want a burrito."



The Mexican town of Naco looked rustic—like the movie set of an old Western. The main street was lined with stucco-covered buildings: taquerias, ice cream shops, and, most noticeably, a *farmacia*, which was one of the largest buildings in the town. There were also a lot of skinny stray dogs running around in packs.

A couple of blocks from the border we passed the Cruz Roja—the Mexican Red Cross—which Scott told us had been set up there to help illegal immigrants who were caught and deported from the United States.

“Every year the border patrol catches more than three hundred thousand illegal immigrants attempting to enter the U.S.,” Scott said. “They return many of them here. Most go back to their homes, but not all of them.”

After we passed what looked like a taco stand, Ostin asked, “Is anyone hungry besides me?”

“I think we’re all hungry,” I said.

“I was serious about the burrito,” Tessa said. “Think we could find some decent Mexican food?”

McKenna looked at her. “Are you kidding?”

“What? I just don’t want any more Chinese food. Especially swamp eel.”

“There’s a restaurant across the street from the hotel,” Scott said. “But let’s check in first. Michael, open the glove box.”

I reached down and opened it. Inside was a thick bundle of brightly colored bills. "Go ahead and take those. That's a thousand pesos. In case any of you want to buy something."

"Whoa," Jack said, leaning forward. "*Mucho dinero.*"

"Don't get too excited," Scott said. "It's only worth about sixty U.S. dollars."

* * *

A few minutes later, we reached the Naco Hotel. Scott parked the van near the front doors, and we all went inside. The hotel clerk was an older Mexican man with salt-and-pepper hair and a gray mustache.

"I need six rooms," Scott said. "Do you have that many?"

"*Sí, señor.* For how many nights?"

"Just for tonight," he said.

The man looked at the screen of an aged computer. "That will be 7,286 pesos." He brought out a calculator and typed in some numbers. "That's four hundred and sixty American dollars. Will that be on a credit card?"

"No, I'll pay with cash," Scott said, taking out his wallet. "You take dollars?"

"*Sí, señor.*"

Scott laid out five one-hundred-dollar bills.

"I only have change in pesos," the clerk said.

"That's all right," Scott said. "We can always use pesos."

The man figured out the change on his calculator and gave it to Scott. Then he unhooked six brass keys from the wall behind him and set them on the counter.

Scott turned back to us. "We're going to sleep two in a room, so buddy up."

Ostin looked over at me, and I nodded.

"Is the taqueria across the street still open?" Scott asked the man.

"For all of you to eat?"

"Yes."

"*Sí.* I will call the owner and he will open. He is my *amigo.*"

Scott said to us, "Everyone grab a key and put your things in your rooms; then we'll meet across the street at that restaurant."

As I took our key, Taylor touched my arm. "What floor are you guys on?"

"Three."

"We're on the main floor. We'll wait for you."

The hotel had an elevator, but it was tiny, so Ostin and I just took the stairs. We were in room 327, a small, rectangular room with one window and two beds covered with sun-bleached chocolate-brown bedspreads.

"I'll take that one," Ostin said, throwing his bag onto the bed closest to the door. "If you don't care."

"I don't. Let's go eat."

We locked our door, then went downstairs, where Taylor and McKenna were waiting for us. The four of us crossed the wide street to Miguel's Taqueria.

The restaurant was old, but fairly clean. Three tables were already set with utensils, tortillas, hot salsa, and iced bottles of pineapple and strawberry Mexican soda pop. Everyone was eating flour tortillas and tortilla chips with guacamole and bean dip. Taylor, McKenna, Ostin, and I sat down at the table with Scott. There was a black lava rock bowl in the center of the table piled high with fresh guacamole. Scott pushed a woven basket of tortillas toward us.

"These are fresh. They just cooked them for us."

"I love homemade tortillas," Ostin said. He rolled up a tortilla, dipped it into the guacamole, then took a big bite. "That's better Mexican than Idaho has."

"You think?" Zeus said sarcastically. "Maybe it's because *we're in Mexico?*"

"Idaho has excellent Mexican food," Ostin said. "We have lots of Mexicans living there."

"Everyone, look over your menus," Scott said. "Lillia will be back in a minute to take our orders."

"Who?" Taylor asked.

"The owner's wife," Abigail said.

The menu was printed in both Spanish and English, though the English translations were pretty funny. There was pig-spit. (I assume they meant pig roasted on a spit.) Roasted rabbi. (Rabbit?) And Jack's favorite, "The water served here was passed by the owner." No comment.

I was really hungry and ordered a combo plate with two shredded beef tacos, a chile relleno, and a side serving of rice and refried beans.

Taylor ordered the same but with only one taco. Less than twenty minutes later Lillia brought out our meals. While we were eating, Scott said, "Naco's really an interesting town."

"By 'interesting' do you mean 'lame' or 'ghetto'?" Tessa said.

Scott grinned. "Maybe not as interesting as it used to be, but it has history. Its nickname was, '*Un pueblo chico, olvidado de Dios.*'"

"A small village forgotten by God," Ostin translated.

"That about sums it up," Tessa said.

"Naco is where the longest sustained battle of the Mexican Revolution took place. Any old building here still has bullet holes. The hotel we're staying at used to advertise that it has thirty-inch-thick mud walls that are bulletproof."

"That's how to advertise a resort," Tessa said. "'You probably won't be killed until you go outside.'"

"For entertainment, U.S. citizens used to line the border to watch the fighting. The Mexicans were careful not to shoot over the border, because they didn't want America getting involved in the war."

"Now, there's a wholesome family activity," Tessa said. "Let's go down to the border and watch them kill each other."

"Speaking of bullets," I said, "let's talk about tomorrow."

Scott groaned a little. "*As I said*, there're not going to be any bullets or fighting. If we see any sign of the Elgen, we turn back."

"Yeah, I heard you," I said.

Taylor looked at me with a worried expression. She knew I wanted to fight.

Scott continued. "I asked the hotel clerk if he'd seen any Americans wearing black or purple uniforms. He said he hadn't, but he did tell me that there had been some explosions down south, then some smoke for several days. He thought that either the Mexican Army was conducting war games or there was a raid on a drug cartel. Of course he didn't know anything about the ranch."

"Did you ask if he saw any other Americans?" I asked.

"I asked if your mother or Ostin's parents had stayed at the hotel. He didn't remember them, and he couldn't find their names on the guest register."

"If they came this way, I doubt they'd use their real names," Taylor said.

"No, they wouldn't," Scott said. "And to escape the Elgen, they might have gone west or even south."

The idea of my mother fleeing for her life made me start ticking. Taylor put her hand on my arm to calm me.

"What time are we leaving in the morning?" McKenna asked.

"The ranch is a two-hour drive from here, so I think we should leave around four. We'll be coming in from the east on an old mining road

that will give us some cover. With Ian's help, we should be able to see them before they see us."

"If they're still there," Ostin said. "I'm betting they're not."

"We can hope," Scott said.

We finished our dinners, with some churros and an order of flan for dessert. Scott spoke to us again before we left the restaurant.

"Remember, we're leaving at four, so get some rest and be in the lobby ready to go no later than five minutes to the hour."

"Do we need our luggage?" Abigail asked.

"No. If all goes well, we'll be back tomorrow night, then head back the next morning. So get some rest."

Everyone walked back to the hotel. Taylor and I were the last to leave the taqueria, and she took my hand as we walked outside. It was dark except for a nearly full moon that lit the sky.

"You didn't eat very much," I said.

"My stomach hurts."

"Maybe you should see a doctor or something."

"It's probably just stress." She looked at me. "You're the one I'm worried about."

I didn't say anything. It felt like my brain and heart were tied up together in knots. We walked slowly, taking in the cool night air. Neither of us spoke for a while. A brindled dog ran toward us, growling. I began sparking, but Taylor just reached out her hand, and he suddenly stopped, then wandered away.

"It's cool how you can do that to animals."

"They're a little harder than humans," she said. "I think it's because they act more on instinct than thought. Thoughts are easier to control. At least for me."

I didn't reply. These days I didn't feel like I had any control over my own thoughts, let alone someone else's. After a few minutes Taylor said, "What are you thinking?"

"I was just thinking that it's hard to believe that's the same moon we were looking at in Taiwan just a few days ago."

"Same moon, different world." She sighed. "Just imagine what she's seen."

"The moon is the earth's witness," I said.

She smiled sadly. "That's poetic."

For a moment we were both silent. Then I said, "You were right. There is no going back."

"There never was," she said. After a moment she leaned into me and we kissed. Suddenly I felt a current of electricity flowing through our mouths, and Taylor leaned back. "Wow. Your kisses are electric."

"That's what all the girls say," I said.

She grinned. "You already told me that I'm the only girl you've ever kissed."

"It's true."

"That's still hard for me to believe," she said.

"I think my Tourette's scared them."

"Or maybe you just thought it did."

"Maybe," I said.

We kissed again. Then Taylor said, "Tomorrow starts early. We'd better get some sleep."

We turned and walked back to the hotel. When we entered the lobby, Ostin, McKenna, and Nichelle were sitting on vinyl couches near the front door playing cards.

"You guys want in?" McKenna asked. "We're playing hearts."

"No, thanks," I said. "We're going to bed."

"You guys should too," Taylor said. "Tomorrow could be crazy."

"We'll just play one more hand," McKenna said.

Taylor asked, "Would you like me to stay with you for a while, or do you want to be alone?"

I shook my head. "I don't want to be alone."

"I don't want to leave you alone," she said.

We headed upstairs to my room. I unlocked the door, and we went in. I lay back on my bed, and Taylor lay down next to me. "I'm so worried about you," she said again. "Can I hold you?"

I nodded. "I'll try not to shock you this time."

She put her arms around me. "Don't be afraid. Remember what your mother always said, 'Things have a way of working out.'"

Hearing this made me angry. "My mother's dead. So things didn't really *work out*."

"You don't know that, Michael," she said quietly. "At least not yet." Neither of us said anything for a while. Then Taylor said, "If it's true about your mother, what will you do?"

"If Hatch killed my mother, I'm going to hunt him down."

Taylor thought for a moment, then said, "Whatever you want."

"I didn't mean you."

She raised herself up on one elbow. "What are you saying?"

"I'm just saying you don't need to come with me."

“Is that what you want?”

“None of this is what I want. I’d just rather not see you die because of me.”

“Maybe I’d rather die than never see you again.”

“Why?”

“You’re asking why? After all we’ve been through, you still don’t know I love you?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m just upset.”

“I know. Let’s not talk, okay?”

She pulled me into her again, and for the next ten minutes we just lay together in silence. Taylor had just fallen asleep when someone knocked. I carefully undraped her arms from around me, then got up and opened the door. It was Ostin.

“Sorry, you have the key.” He stepped inside. “Taylor’s here.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Where’s McKenna?” Taylor asked sleepily.

“She went back to your room. She was tired.”

“Do you want me to leave?” Taylor asked.

“No, you’re good,” Ostin said.

I lay back on the bed, and this time I held her. In just a few minutes, Taylor fell asleep again. After a half hour or so, I looked over at Ostin. His eyes were wide open. “I can’t sleep,” I whispered.

“Me neither. Let’s see if we can get something on TV.”

“Taylor’s sleeping,” I said.

“I’ll keep the volume low.”

The television was ancient—the kind with an antenna on top. Not surprisingly, the picture came in fuzzy. Ostin adjusted the antennas, which made the picture a little better, but not by much. Then he flipped through about a dozen channels, most of which were in Spanish. He finally stopped on a show called *Gilligan’s Island*. It was an American show, but Spanish had been dubbed in over their voices. I had seen the show in English—I had watched it on reruns—but it was funnier in Spanish.

After it, there were other old American shows, one called *Hogan’s Heroes*, the next called *The Wild Wild West*.

By the time the third show came on, Ostin was asleep. I looked at my watch. It was half past twelve. We would be meeting downstairs in just three and a half hours.

I carefully let Taylor go, then got up and turned off the television. It was strange that turning on the TV hadn’t woken Taylor, but turning it

off did. As I was about to leave the room, Taylor said, "Michael?"

I turned back. "Yeah."

"Is it time to get up?"

"No. It's only twelve thirty."

"Where are you going?"

"Out for a walk. I can't sleep."

She rubbed her eyes. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No. Get some sleep."

"Okay." She rolled back over. I grabbed the room key, stepped out into the dimly lit hallway, and then walked downstairs to the lobby. There was now a young Mexican woman at the front desk. I nodded as I walked past.

"*Buenas noches*," she said.

"Yeah, *buenas noches*," I replied, which is about all I remembered from eighth-grade Spanish.

I walked out into the warm night air. The small town was asleep, and the only sound was that of crickets and the occasional howl of a dog or coyote. I looked around, then walked out to the main road and back toward the U.S. border.

Even though there were no streetlamps, the moon was bright enough to see where I was going. Normally I would have been worried that someone might notice my glow, but I didn't care about that right now. The truth was, I didn't care much about anything. My mind was too preoccupied by other emotions. In six hours I'd know the truth about my mother. I was already in so much pain that I couldn't even imagine how the truth would affect me. What if I found her body? I didn't know if I could live with that.

I walked about three blocks from the hotel, turning at a road sign that read CALLE HILDAGO near some kind of weird monument in the center of the road—a stucco and concrete slab adorned with the plaster bust of a man wearing a bow tie. Several old pickup trucks were parked up against the curb, and as I walked around them, I saw a group of young Mexican men. A gang. They immediately started walking toward me.

"*Güero!*" one of them shouted.

I counted seven guys, all a little older than me. Three of them carried bottles of beer, and two of them were probably drunk, as they were wobbling a little. Three of them wore white tank tops, and one wore a T-shirt that read:

I got caught trying to cross
the border, and all I got was
this lousy T-shirt

Three had no shirts at all, exposing myriad gang tattoos that covered their arms and backs. The one who seemed to be the leader, the tallest of the group, said, “*¿Qué estás haciendo en nuestra ciudad?*”

The man next to him with a bottle said, “*Está caminando en nuestra calle.*”

I looked back and forth between them. “I don’t speak Spanish.”

I didn’t know whether they understood me or not, but they all laughed. The tall man nodded. “No worry, *gringo*. I speak English. Bad news for you. We will take your money. And your watch.”

“I’m not giving you anything,” I said. “Just leave me alone.” I turned away from them.

“*¿Qué dijo?*”

“*Dijo déjame en paz.*”

As I was walking away from them, an empty beer bottle hit me on the side of my head. Fortunately, it wasn’t a direct hit, or it probably would have knocked me out. Instead, it caught me in the back of my jaw, cutting the skin beneath my ear. I spun around. It took every ounce of willpower I had not to fry them all to ashes. “Who threw that?” I shouted.

They looked at one another, coolly, smiling. Then the shortest of them motioned to himself with both hands. “*Lo hice yo, güero. Ven por mí.*”

I didn’t know what he said, but he wore a big, stupid grin. Then I noticed that he was blinking wildly, imitating my facial tics. I wanted to melt his face.

“You have five seconds to run away,” I said. I thought about what Spanish I knew and said, “*Cinco secondi vámonos!*”

They all burst out laughing. Then two of the guys pulled out switchblades. The one closest to me said, “*Vamos a cortar ese güero.*”

“My friends do not like you, *gringo*,” the tall one said. “They want to cut you.” The gang fanned out, forming a near circle around me. “. . . And then we take your money.”

The small guy with the knife was now behind me, walking toward me.

“Times up,” I said. I spun around and pulsed, blasting the little dude so hard that his feet left the ground. He slammed into an adobe wall,

and plaster fell around him as he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

“Bet that hurt,” I said. Then, as I turned back around, something bizarre happened to me—something that had never happened before. Electricity completely encompassed me in a brilliant, bluish-green light. It was almost as if I had become one of my lightning balls, and the sound of electricity sizzled like a hundred frying pans of bacon. I looked down at my arms and couldn’t see my flesh, only the brilliant glow of electricity. When I looked back up, the gang was just staring at me like I was a ghost. Actually, I was something much stranger.

I spread out my arms and pulsed. The force blew out from me in a shock wave more than fifty feet in diameter. When I looked around, all the gang members were lying on their backs. Most of them weren’t moving. The tall guy was still conscious, staring at me in fear. As I started toward him, he pulled out a gun.

“*Diablo,*” he said, pointing his gun at me.

I shook my head as I walked toward him. “You really don’t want to do that,” I said. “It will just make me angrier.” My eyes narrowed as I raised my hand in front of me. “And I am already really, really angry.”

I was so electric that I could actually see waves of electromagnetism blurring the air in front of me. The guy fired six times, and the bullets flew around me, ricocheting against cars and buildings. One of the bullets hit one of his buddies. When he had used all his bullets, I said, “I warned you.” I blasted him so hard, his clothes caught on fire.

Then I looked around. All of the gang members were still unconscious, or pretending to be, except for one—the guy with the border-crossing T-shirt. He had gotten to his feet and now raised a knife at me, though he seemed to be having trouble holding it steady.

“If that’s your plan, *amigo*, you’re gonna need a bigger knife,” I said. He looked so pathetic, I shook my head. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you never bring a knife to a lightning fight?” I walked toward him. “Let me show you something.” I produced a lightning ball about the size of a volleyball. “*Mucho* interesting, *sí?*”

He just stared in fear. “*No, señor.*”

“Now I’m ‘*señor,*’” I said. “But I made it especially for you. Catch.” I lobbed it to him. He weakly raised his hands to block it. It exploded on contact with his flesh, knocking him out with the force.

I walked to his side and pushed him over with my foot. “You think you can go around threatening innocent people? Maybe you’ll think twice next time.” I reached down and picked up the guy’s knife, folded it back, and put it into my pocket as a souvenir, then started back to the

hotel. Only then did I really feel the sting of my gash. Blood was trickling down my jaw and had soaked my collar.

As I walked into the lobby, I put my hand over my cut to cover it from the woman who was still at the front desk. She was staring at me.

“*Buenas noches*,” I said.

“*Buenas noches*,” she repeated with a frightened expression.

I ran back upstairs. I entered my room as quietly as I could, but Taylor still woke.

“Michael?”

“Go back to sleep,” I said.

She watched me as I walked to the bathroom. I turned on the bathroom light, then soaked a towel with cold water and put it against my face.

“Michael, what happened?”

“It’s nothing.”

Then Ostin woke. “Is it time to go?”

“It’s time to go back to *sleep*,” I said.

“What’s up?” Ostin asked. “Besides us.”

Taylor got up and walked toward me. “Michael, what happened?” she asked again.

“Some loser threw a beer bottle at me.”

She looked at me with a peculiar gaze. “I meant to your arms.”

I looked down. “What the . . .” There was a strange reddish fern-leaf-like pattern on my arms.

“Holy moly,” Ostin said. “Those are Lichtenberg figures.”

“They’re what?” Taylor asked.

I tried to wipe the marks off with my towel, but they appeared to be permanent. Like tattoos. “What is it?”

“They’re called Lichtenberg figures or lightning trees. They appear with extremely high voltages. I’ve seen pictures of scars like that on lightning strike victims.”

“Will they come off?” Taylor asked.

“No,” Ostin said. “They’re scars. Michael, did you just have a super-big surge?”

“Yes. When the gang attacked me. It was like I had become an electric ball.”

“Gang?” Taylor said. “What gang?”

Ostin walked over to examine my markings. “Wow. They look kind of cool.”

“Do they hurt?” Taylor asked.

“No. I didn’t even feel it happen.”

After a moment Taylor said, “Well, I’m sure your jaw hurts. It’s swelling up. We need to get some ice on it. Ostin, there’s an ice machine at the end of the hall. Would you fill up that bucket?”

“On it.” Ostin grabbed the ice bucket from the dresser and left the room, while Taylor soaked a washcloth in cold water from the sink. I just stared at my arms. Was this really permanent?

When Ostin returned, Taylor dumped some of the ice onto the towel and rolled it up. As she held the cloth to my face, she suddenly closed her eyes and grimaced. “Oh, my . . .” She was watching the replay of my attack. She looked into my eyes. “Did any of them die?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You know they’re going to tell others,” Ostin said.

“I don’t care,” I said.

He frowned. “You will when they come after us.”

“I pity anyone who comes after us,” I said angrily. “I’ll take down this whole country if I have to.”

“Michael,” Taylor said. “You need to calm down. You’re really upset.”

“I wonder why,” I said sardonically. “Maybe because I was just attacked by a gang that was planning to stab me to death.”

“You have every reason to be upset for that, but that’s not why you’re upset.” She looked me in the eyes. “They didn’t kill your mother.”

“I don’t care.”

“You need to care. You need to stay in control.” She pulled back the blood-soaked cloth to examine my wound. “It’s not that deep. Ostin, go down to the front desk and see if you can find a bandage.”

“You got it.” He walked back out.

Taylor rinsed the blood from the washcloth, put more ice in it, and held it against my jaw. I just kept looking at my arms.

Ostin returned a few minutes later with a box of off-brand Band-Aids. “This is all they had.”

“It will take a few of them,” Taylor said. She dabbed the cloth around my wound again, then applied three different bandages. Then she got a fresh washcloth and soaked it in water, wrapped it around more ice, and gave it to me. “Keep this on your face. Now you better get some sleep. We have to leave in two hours.” She kissed me on my other cheek. “I’m going back to my room. Get some rest.”

“Thank you,” I said. After she left, I took the switchblade out of my pocket and tossed it on the floor. I turned out the lights and got back into bed, holding the cloth against my cheek.

“Are you okay?” Ostin asked.

“No.”

“Yeah, me neither,” he said. “Good night.”

“Night.”

It seemed like just a few seconds after I’d shut my eyes that I woke to the room’s phone ringing. The wet, bloodstained washcloth was lying on the other side of the bed, soaking and staining the sheets.

Ostin grabbed the phone. “All right,” he said groggily. He hung up. “It’s Scott. He says to meet downstairs in fifteen minutes.”

We all arrived at the van about the same time. Scott was holding open a large pink box of Mexican pastries—where he’d found an open bakery at four in the morning was beyond me. As I walked toward him, he stared at my bandaged jaw. “What happened?”

“Some guys tried to mug him,” Taylor said, walking up behind me. “They hit him with a bottle.”

Scott looked at me nervously. “What did you do to them?”

“Invited them up for churros,” I said angrily. “What do you think I did to them?”

“Mexican barbecue,” Zeus said. “Wish I had been there.”

“Me too,” Jack said. “I would have loved to help out.”

“Trust me, he didn’t need any help,” Taylor said.

Jack grinned. “Still would have been fun to watch.”

Suddenly Abigail gasped. “Michael, what happened to your arms?”

Everyone looked at me.

“They’re lightning burns,” Ostin said.

“Lichtenberg figures,” Zeus said.

“How did you know that?” Ostin asked. I’m sure he was disappointed that someone besides him knew what they were called.

“Because I’ve given them to people,” Zeus said. “It’s like my calling card.”

“What people?” Taylor asked.

Zeus frowned. “GPs—Hatch’s guinea pigs—mostly.”

“Sorry I asked,” Taylor said.

“It’s my past,” Zeus said. “It is what it is.”

“I don’t get it,” Jack said, still staring at my arm. “What are they?”

“They’re scars made by the diffusion of electricity through his skin,” Ostin said. “Lichtenberg figures were discovered in 1777 by a German

scientist named Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. He built a machine to generate high-voltage static electricity, then recorded the resulting patterns it made by sprinkling powder onto a nonconducting surface. Afterward, he pressed blank sheets of paper onto these patterns. It's how he discovered the basic principle of xerography and today's laser printers."

"You asked," Tessa said to Jack.

"Do they hurt?" Abigail asked.

"No. I didn't even feel it happen."

"It looks cool," Nichelle said. "Really cool. Maybe I'll tattoo myself like that when we get back to civilization."

"It's like a battle marking," Jack said. "Like the way Maori warriors tattooed themselves before going to war. I think I'll do it too."

Everyone kept staring at me until I finally said, "All right, quit looking at me. Let's go."

"You heard him," Scott said. "Everyone into the van. Grab a pastry if you want one."

I passed on the food. We all piled into the vehicle. Taylor, McKenna, Ostin, and I crowded into the backseat. I must have been ticking a lot, because Taylor put her hand on my face. "Michael, you can lie against me if you want. You need sleep."

I lay my head on Taylor's shoulder, and she ran her fingers through my hair until I fell asleep. I didn't wake until about two hours later when we pulled off the freeway onto a dirt road.

"Where are we?" I asked, lifting my head.

"Still Mexico," Ostin said.

"We're about a half hour from the ranch," Taylor said.

"Ian, keep your eyes open," Scott said. "Let me know if you see anyone. And keep your eyes open for land mines."

"I can blow them," I said. "If I have to."

"We don't want to blow them," Scott said. "If the Elgen are still around, they'll hear it."

"Why do you think they're still around?" Jack asked. "That's like robbing a bank and then hanging around until the police arrive."

"It only makes sense if your real target isn't the bank but the police," Ostin said.

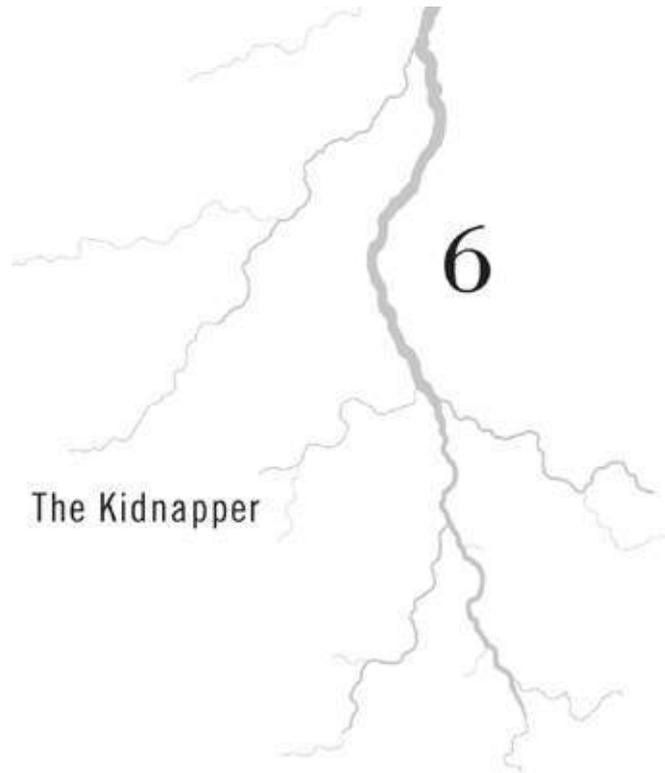
"Exactly," Scott said. "You know better than anyone that Hatch doesn't give up easily. You escaped the Elgen in Taiwan, so they might assume you'll be returning to the ranch. They may be waiting. The Elgen love traps."

“The Elgen love traps like spiders love webs,” Ostin said.

For the first time I understood exactly why Scott had been so cautious. He was right. There was a very good chance we were walking into a trap. But trap or not, if I saw them, I was going to fight.



PART THREE



Boise police headquarters Boise, Idaho

Chief Davis stuck his head into the break room where Taylor's father, Officer Charles Ridley, was eating his lunch from a brown paper sack—his usual pastrami-and-mustard sandwich on rye with dill pickles and a bag of potato chips. He was reading the sports page of the *Boise Herald*. The Boise State Broncos were having another unbeaten season, and he was angry that his team still couldn't get any respect from the national press. These days he spent a lot of time reading about sports. It helped him keep his mind off his missing daughter.

"Chuck, could I speak with you for a moment?" Davis asked.

Ridley looked up from the paper. "Sure, boss. What do you need?"

"Come to my office, please."

Ridley chuckled nervously, as the chief was rarely this formal. "I'm not in trouble, am I?"

Davis didn't smile. "Just come with me, please."

Ridley wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, then wadded it up into a ball and tossed it into the corner wastebasket. "No problem."

He followed the chief down the hall to his office. To Ridley's surprise there were two men in suits waiting for them. One was a tall

sandy-haired man in a navy blazer. The other was shorter with a shaved head exposing just a shadow of hair stubble. He had an ash-gray pin-striped suit. They were both standing behind Davis's desk, wearing serious expressions.

"Gentlemen, this is Officer Ridley," Davis said.

"Have a seat, Officer," the taller of the two men said. "I'm Officer Cazier, and this is my partner, Officer Ogden."

Ridley looked at the chief, who nodded. Ridley sat down in one of the black vinyl chairs in front of the desk, his eyes nervously darting back and forth between the two men. "What's going on?"

Chief Davis folded his arms at his chest. "Chuck, these officers are from internal affairs."

Ridley's blood pressure rose. "Internal affairs? Have I done something?"

"It's not what *you've* done, Officer. This matter concerns your daughter."

He leaned forward eagerly. "You found Taylor?"

"No, I'm sorry. We haven't. But we have a lead and a possible new suspect in her disappearance."

Ridley's brow furrowed. "A suspect? What do you mean a 'suspect'? She ran away."

"We don't think so," said Ogden. "We have reason to believe that your daughter was abducted."

Ridley felt his chest constrict. "Abducted. By whom?"

The officers looked uncomfortably at each other. Cazier said, "What we're about to tell you is highly confidential."

"Of course," Ridley said impatiently. "Who took my daughter?"

Cazier took a step toward him. "We believe your wife might have something to do with your daughter's disappearance."

Ridley almost laughed. "My wife? Julie?" He shook his head. "That's ridiculous. She's cried herself to sleep every night since Taylor ran away. You're crazy."

Cazier didn't flinch. "Like we said, we don't believe your daughter ran away. In fact, the evidence is pretty clear that she didn't."

"Evidence!" Ridley said angrily. "I read the text messages from her."

"The text messages you read weren't sent from your daughter's phone, Officer."

Ridley looked at them quizzically. "What?"

"We've been unable to track down the owner of the phone that the messages were sent from, but we know for certain that it wasn't your

daughter's."

"Then how did it show my daughter's name on my caller ID?"

"Whoever did this had advanced technological capabilities. They might have even been watching you through *your* phone."

"Does your daughter have friends in Peru?" Cazier asked.

"Peru? What does that—"

"That's where the texts originated."

Ridley was flustered. "I don't know. Maybe she met someone online."

Cazier leaned forward. "Does your wife have any friends in Peru?"

"No."

"Are you certain?"

Ridley exhaled loudly. "I don't know, maybe she has a client there. Her travel agency sends people all over the world. Why?"

"Because your wife has received several phone calls from that same phone in Peru," Cazier said.

"Do you know where your wife is right now?" Ogden asked.

"She's at work."

"Has she been traveling recently?"

"A few weeks ago she went on a business trip to Scottsdale."

"How long has she been back in Idaho?"

"Like I said, about three weeks."

"Was she acting differently when she returned?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did she say or do anything out of the ordinary?"

Ridley rubbed his forehead. The truth was, he had thought she was acting strange. He had even asked her what was going on, but she had just brushed him off. Still, he wasn't about to tell them that. "No, she's just been stressed by work. As usual."

"Do you know why she went to Scottsdale?" Cazier asked.

"She said . . ." He stopped himself. "She had a meeting with a new client."

The officers looked at each other. "Do you know who this client is?"

"Of course not," Ridley erupted. "I don't know any of her clients. Just like she doesn't know who I pulled over today." Ridley leaned forward. "Look, if you're accusing us of kidnapping—"

Chief Davis raised his hand to calm his officer. "Chuck, these men aren't accusing you of anything. They're just trying to help find your daughter."

"Then stop wasting time harassing the victims!"

The two men just looked at Ridley stoically. "Officer, are you sure your wife told you she was going to Scottsdale?"

"Of course I'm sure."

Both of the agents just looked at him.

"Why? Are you saying she didn't go there?"

Ogden shook his head. "Your wife never went to Scottsdale. She was on a private jet that crossed the border into Mexico into an area that's known to be controlled by drug cartels."

"Drug cartels?"

"We've secured flight information that verifies that."

"Why would she do that?"

"That's what we want to know," Cazier said.

Ogden said, "We have reason to believe that your wife was meeting with some suspicious individuals. We don't know if they're trafficking weapons, drugs, or people, but they are under FBI investigation. We have this satellite photo from Homeland Security." He lifted a photograph of the Timepiece Ranch compound. "It appears to be a compound of some type near Nogales, Mexico. They have advanced weaponry and even a helicopter."

Ridley looked at the photograph, then handed it back. "Where are you coming up with this stuff?"

"Three days ago we received a tip from an anonymous source."

"An anonymous tip," Ridley said disparagingly.

"If these people are as dangerous as we believe they are, it's not surprising the leak would choose to remain anonymous," Ogden said.

Cazier nodded. "You should be advised that everything this source has told us so far has been verifiable. Does your wife often take off on business trips?"

"No. This is the first trip like this she's ever been on."

The officers nodded, as if their point had been confirmed. Cazier looked Ridley in the eye. "Your daughter isn't the only missing person report we're working on. There have been four other kids and three adults who have gone missing as well, all of them from this same area and most of them disappearing at the same time as your daughter."

"How did I not know this?" Ridley asked.

"Are you familiar with a youth named Michael Vey?" Ogden asked.

"Vey?" Ridley said. "He was one of Taylor's friends."

"Vey and his mother have both disappeared. The peculiar thing is that when we did background checks on them, we couldn't find anything. They've been living off the grid for more than five years,

except for their cell phones. We've traced numerous calls between your wife and daughter and Vey prior to your daughter's disappearance. We're guessing there's a connection."

Ridley shook his head. "We went to see Vey the night Taylor disappeared."

"Who, you and your wife?"

"Yes."

"Where did you go?"

"Vey's apartment."

"Was he there?"

Ridley nodded. "Yeah. We talked to him."

"Do you remember what he said?"

"Not really. I mean, it was a rough night. We asked if he knew where Taylor was. He said he didn't, so we asked him to let us know if she contacted him. That's the last we heard of him."

"The day your daughter disappeared, was she with him?"

"She was supposed to go to a party with him. . . . I think it was his birthday."

Ogden asked, "Was his mother at the apartment when you visited?"

Ridley thought. "No. She wasn't. It was just the kid."

"We've done some checking around. The last contact anyone had with Vey's mother was the day of your daughter's disappearance. She worked at a grocery store and missed her shift the next day."

Ridley took a deep breath. "Look. I deal with guilty people every day. I have a sixth sense when they're lying and when they're hiding something. My wife isn't guilty. She's been inconsolable since our daughter disappeared."

"I understand," Cazier said. "But we both know that there is more than one reason to be inconsolable."

"What are you saying?"

Again the chief interrupted him. "Chuck, just keep it cool. No one's accusing anyone of anything."

"Except my wife!" Ridley shouted. "They're calling her a kidnapper. Where's the proof?"

"Officer Ridley's right," Cazier said. "The truth is, we don't know what's going on yet. We have a few new leads and a lot of unanswered questions." He took a deep breath. "I hate to bring this up, but you know as well as we do that after all this time, the odds aren't great that your daughter is still alive. But there's still a chance. So you can either

cooperate with us and help us find your daughter, or you can fight us. What will it be, Officer?"

Ridley was quiet a moment, then said, "Of course I'll do whatever I can to find my daughter."

"Good. Then you'll understand why you'll have to be suspended from your job for a while."

"What?" Ridley spun toward the chief. "You're letting them suspend me?"

"It was my decision to suspend you, Chuck. For your own safety, as well as the department's. It's best for everyone if you're not around."

Ridley covered his eyes with his hands. "This is nuts."

"We'll keep the department informed of our investigation," Ogden said. "In the meantime, we need to question your wife."

Ridley looked back up. "Are you arresting her?"

"Yes," Ogden said.

Ridley groaned. "Can you keep this out of the news?"

"You know we can't," Ogden said. "But we might be able to delay it a day or so. We wanted to give you some time to contact your other children and let them know. But not until after we have your wife in custody."

"There's no way she's involved in any of this. I don't know what she was doing in Mexico, but I'm sure there's a simple answer."

"Which is why we're questioning her. To give her a chance to explain herself. If you're right, and we hope you are, there's nothing to worry about."

"Please don't arrest her at work," Ridley said. "She doesn't need that kind of embarrassment."

"You know that—"

"Please," Ridley interrupted. "She's not a criminal. I don't know what's going on, but she's as pure as snow."

Davis said, "Gentlemen, we have no reason to believe that Mrs. Ridley is a flight risk. I think we can wait a few hours until she's home."

"All right," Cazier said. "But we'll be staking out her office and following her home. We can't afford to lose her."

"Fair enough," Davis said.

"Thank you," Ridley said.

"One more question," Ogden said. "I realize that this is a difficult question for you, with serious implications, but does your wife use drugs?"

"Of course not."

“Are you certain?”

“I’m a police officer. I think I would notice that. She has trouble swallowing a Tylenol.”

The men looked at each other. Then Cazier said, “I think that’s all for now. Do you and your wife share cars?”

“No. I drive the patrol car; she has her van.”

“Okay. We’ll need to have forensics check her van for evidence,” Cazier said. “Good day.”

Once the men left the office, Ridley just sat in the chair, stunned. Then he buried his face in his hands.

After a moment Chief Davis walked over to him, putting his hand on Ridley’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Chuck. This caught me by surprise too.”

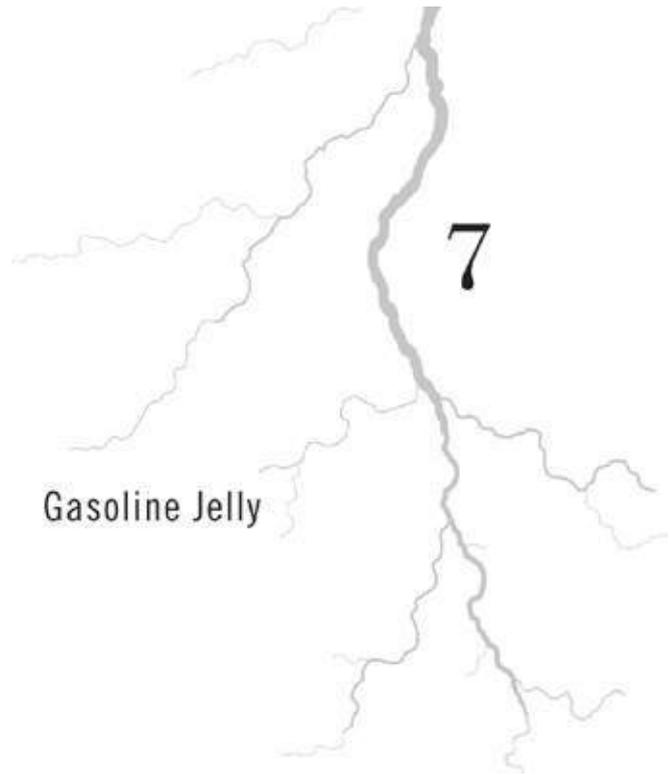
“I know Julie. She couldn’t be guilty of this.” He looked up. “She’s never even had a speeding ticket. But why would she lie to me about Scottsdale?”

“I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation,” Chief Davis said. “I’m sure everything will turn out just fine.”

Ridley just shook his head. “But why would she lie to me?”



PART FOUR



Nogales, Mexico

The sun was rising behind us as our van rattled slowly along the rutted, dusty road. After another twenty minutes the landscape changed from plains to small rolling hills and valleys. The vegetation, mostly saguaro and mesquite, was charred black. In the distance we could see a thin gray column of smoke rising into the sky.

“They used napalm,” Ostin said, his voice quivering.

“How can you tell?” I asked.

“You can smell the phosphorous.”

“What’s napalm?” Nichelle asked.

“It’s like gasoline jelly,” Ostin said. “The U.S. Army used it for attacking bunkers and machine gun nests in World War II. Then they used it to clear the jungle in Vietnam. Whatever it hits, it sticks to and burns.”

Again, my thoughts turned to my mother and the horror she must have experienced. As we neared the ranch, Scott had to slow down even more to avoid the large craters in the road.

“Look,” Taylor said, pointing. “One of the horses.”

About a hundred yards from us, the Appaloosa we had seen in the ranch's corral before we left for Taiwan stood looking at us. It took off, running away from us.

"She's spooked," Taylor said.

"At least someone made it out alive," Nichelle said.

None of us said anything.

A few minutes later, Ian said, "There's something up ahead, to the right. I think it's an undetonated missile."

"One of ours, or theirs?" Scott asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Describe it," Ostin said.

"It's black. It's about six feet long and six inches in diameter. It has little tail fins on back."

"Do you know what it is?" I asked.

"Sounds like a Hellfire missile," Ostin said. "It's an air-to-surface missile originally designed for antitank attacks, but now it's used for precision strikes. They have a fairly short range, less than five miles, which means the Elgen must have flown in for the attack. Probably in helicopters. That's what the Hellfire was originally designed for."

Scott slowed the van down. "Are we safe passing it?"

"How far is the missile from the road?" Ostin asked.

"About a hundred yards."

"We're safe. Hellfires carry a highly explosive twenty-pound warhead, but they're directional. If it's not flying at us, we're okay. It's highly unlikely it would go off now."

"How many of those missiles can a helicopter carry?" I asked.

"Sixteen," Jack said.

Ostin looked like someone had beaten him to the buzzer on a game show. "How'd you know that?"

"The marines use them to clear the ground before landing," Jack said. "My brother told me."

"They must have had a lot of helicopters to fire that many missiles," Nichelle said. "The ground looks like the moon."

"The missiles made some of these craters," Ostin said. "But most of them are from the ranch's land mines."

"How can you tell?" Taylor asked.

"Hellfire missiles are shot down to penetrate a target. The land mines are designed to explode upward, so the hole they leave in the ground is more shallow."

A mile later we passed two destroyed Hummers. Both of them were scorched, and one was still smoking. It had nearly been blown in two. As we neared the ranch, the devastation grew even worse. Much worse.

"We're getting close," Scott said. "Everyone keep your eyes open." He turned toward Ian. "If you see any movement at all, you tell me."

"I don't see anything," Ian said. "Except ashes and holes."

Scott slowly edged the van to the upper rim of the canyon until we could see the compound below us. Or at least what was left of it. My stomach turned at the sight of what was before us. What had been the great ranch house was now a pile of charred rubble and brick and twisted chicken wire. Everything had been destroyed.

The buildings were all burned down to their concrete foundations, with smoke still rising from the debris. There were overturned cars and trucks, and the resistance's sole helicopter was on its side, its propeller lying twenty yards away from its burned-out fuselage.

The only thing still standing was one of the windmill generators at least three hundred yards away on the opposite mountain—though every one of its blades was damaged.

"I can't believe this is the same place where we stayed three weeks ago," Taylor said softly.

"They must have fired more than a hundred missiles," Ostin said, his voice strained with emotion. "At least."

After a couple of minutes I said, "I want to go down and see."

"No," Scott said. "It's too risky. It would be too easy for them to trap us in the ravine, and there might be more unexploded bombs."

"There is no *them*," I said. "The Elgen are gone. Just like everyone else."

"We can't take that chance."

"Then I'll walk down," I said, reaching for the door handle.

"Michael," Taylor said. "Please don't."

"Wait," Ian said. "We can go. There's no one around. I'll keep a close watch."

"If Michael's going, I'm going too," Jack said.

"Me too," Zeus said.

Scott took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. "All right. I'll drive down. But we won't stay long." He shook his head. "I have a bad feeling about this."

He shifted the van into drive, and we slowly made our way down into the ravine and the smoking remains of the compound. In a couple

of places the road was nearly impassable, and it took some expert driving to navigate the craters and ruts.

As the road leveled out into the valley, any hope I had that there might be survivors was gone. Nothing could have survived the missile attack that had pulverized the compound, or the firestorm that had followed.

“Welcome to hell,” Nichelle said.

A sickeningly sweet, acrid smell filled our nostrils. “Yeah, they used napalm,” Ostin said softly. “Lots of it.”

The first time we’d seen the compound, Ian had told us that the buildings were surrounded by metal electrical cages, which were now visible, as the buildings’ wood had all burned away. The resistance had prepared for an EMP attack, but apparently not a conventional attack of bombs and bullets. They had little armament other than an attack helicopter and a few armed vehicles, most of which had, apparently, never even made it out of their garages. They were now nothing more than burned, mangled metal surrounded by the remnants of their housing’s concrete foundations.

“They must have been taken totally by surprise,” Jack said. “They didn’t even get their weaponry out.”

“Overkill,” Zeus said, shaking his head. “It’s overkill.”

“It’s strange,” Ian said.

“What’s strange?” I asked, ticking painfully.

He looked back at me. “Why aren’t there any remains?”

“Remains?” Taylor said.

“Bodies. Or bones.”

“Maybe they took prisoners first,” Tessa said. “Then destroyed the place.”

“It doesn’t look like it,” Ostin said. “They were going for complete annihilation.”

The van continued slowly forward, snaking between piles of smoldering rubble smoking like funeral pyres. Finally we stopped in front of what had been the main building.

“I want to get out,” I said.

Scott shut off the van, and we all climbed out. There really wasn’t anything to see but the building’s charred concrete foundation and twisted, black metal wire. I stepped over a wagon wheel, as black as ash. I could see the bones of a horse in a clearing. Other than that there was no evidence of life. Or death. It looked like those war pictures from our history books. I had never seen such devastation in real life.

I bent over and vomited. Abigail put her hand on my back and relieved some of my pain, although I'm sure she was hurting too.

"Ian," Ostin said. "Gervaso said there were underground bunkers. Do you see anyone?" Gervaso had been one of the military coordinators at the ranch. And our friend.

"I'm looking," he said. "So far they're empty."

"I don't get it," I said. "If they came in by helicopter, Tanner could have brought them all down. Just like he did in Peru."

"Unless he wasn't here when they came," Jack said.

"Or maybe they surprised them in the night."

"The Elgen are careful," Ostin said. "They would take the possibility of him being here into account. The Hellfires have a five-mile range. They could fly close enough to fire missiles, then come in after the first attack. There were more than a hundred missiles; he couldn't stop all of them."

"Look," Ian said, pointing southward. There was a burned-out helicopter smashed into the ground. "It's one of theirs."

"Maybe Tanner got one of them," I said.

"Or they shot it down," Jack said. "They had RPGs."

We walked over to the helicopter. As we looked in, Taylor gasped, then quickly turned away.

"What is it?" Tessa asked.

"Bones," I said.

There were burned remains of two Elgen guards inside, still buckled into their seats.

I continued wandering past glowing cinders of debris, looking for some evidence of non-Elgen humanity. But everything was ashes. That's how I felt inside. Ashes.

After a few moments I turned and walked back to the van. Everyone else followed. When we were back inside, Taylor said, "Can we go down that dirt road a ways?"

"Why?" Scott asked.

I glanced over at Taylor. Her eyes were red. "Just, please. I need to see something."

"Just do it," I said.

"All right," Scott said reluctantly. "We've already come this far." He slowly pulled the van forward. Fifty yards from the house there was a large crater in the center of the road, and we had to drive up onto the road's shoulder to get to where Taylor wanted to go—the redbrick utility building where we had had our prom dinner.

"This is the place," she said.

Scott stopped the van, and Taylor slid the door open and stepped out. Only I followed her.

The building wasn't completely decimated like the others—probably because it was so far from the main compound—but it was still reduced to a pile of bricks with only one and a half walls still standing. Taylor walked up to where the front door had been, then picked her way through the rubble. She suddenly stopped to bend over and pick something up. She turned to show me. It was one of the silver candleholders from our dinner.

"It's all gone, Michael." She looked at me with tear-filled eyes. "You were right. They've taken everything."

I took her hand. Just then I heard the sound of a helicopter. I looked up but couldn't see it through the clouds.

Scott yelled, "Everyone out of the van! Take cover, fast!"

We all scrambled from the vehicle, everyone running in different directions before lying flat on the ground. For several minutes we waited tensely.

"What kind of chopper is it?" Scott yelled to Ian.

He paused, then said, "Maybe U.S. border control. There aren't any missiles or guns. They don't look like Elgen."

Less than a minute later the sound of the chopper passed and faded. Scott stood up, visibly shaken. "We've been here too long. We've got to get out of here."

"What a chicken," Jack said to me under his breath.

As we were getting back into the van, Ian said, "Wait. I see something."

I turned to him. "What?"

"It's a person. They might still be alive."

"Where?"

"About a half mile that way," he said, pointing. "He crawled the whole way."

"How can you tell?" Taylor asked.

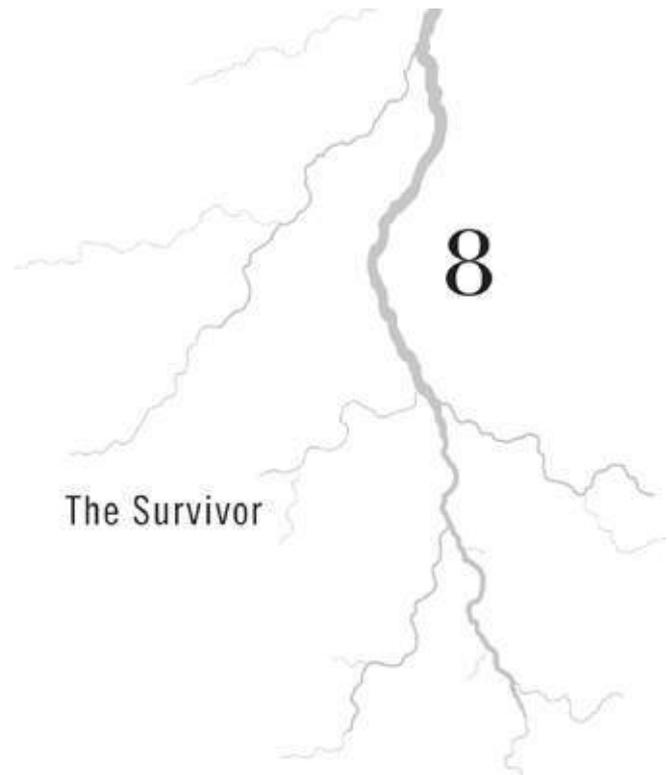
"He left a trail."

"He?" Taylor asked.

Ian shook his head. "Or she. I can't tell from here."

"Are they one of ours?" I asked.

Ian shook his head again. "I don't know. But whoever it is, they're in bad shape."



Scott drove off road, following the direction Ian pointed, along a rutted path.

“Are they armed?” he asked.

“Only a pistol,” Ian said.

“Keep a close eye on him. If he makes for his weapon . . .”

“If he makes for a weapon, I’ll divert it,” I said. “Just get us close to him.”

“A little to the left,” Ian said. “About fifty yards ahead.”

When I first saw the man, I didn’t recognize him as human. He was grotesque-looking. His skin and clothes, what hadn’t been burned off, were charred black, and most of his hair was singed off his head. My first thought was, *Gervaso*. If anyone could have survived an attack, it would be *Gervaso*. But it wasn’t him.

“He’s Elgen,” Ian said.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“His utility belt is standard Elgen. And I can make out part of an Elgen tattoo.”

Scott stopped the van about thirty feet from him.

“He looks dead,” Tessa said.

“His heart’s still beating,” Ian said. “And he’s breathing. Barely. He has lung damage.”

“I’m going to go talk to him,” I said, grabbing the door handle.

“What are you going to ask him?” Scott asked.

“I’m going to ask him where everybody is.”

“I’ll help,” Taylor said. “In case he can’t speak.”

“Abigail, we may need you, too,” I said.

The three of us climbed out of the van, followed by Zeus and Jack.

When we were a few feet from the man, he tried to move his hand toward his gun but couldn’t. His injuries were so severe, it was difficult to even look at him. I couldn’t imagine what pain he must have been in. I would be lying if I said that I wasn’t glad to see him suffering. He was Elgen. For all I knew he had personally killed my mother and Ostin’s parents.

I squatted down next to him. “You’re Elgen.”

Only his eyes moved. He looked at me less in fear than in resignation. In his condition he probably welcomed death. I would have. “I’m Michael Vey.”

His eyes opened a little bit wider, and he grunted.

“Can you speak?”

“Wa . . .”

“He wants water,” Taylor said.

“I’ll get him some,” Abigail said.

“No water,” I said.

Abigail stopped.

“Not until he talks.” I leaned closer to the man. His face was covered in dirt. “Were you part of the attack on the ranch?”

He just looked at me.

“Taylor,” I said. “I need your help.”

She crouched down next to the man. She found a place near the crown of his head that wasn’t burned, and touched him. “Ask again,” Taylor said.

“Were you part of the attack on the ranch?”

Taylor glanced up at me. “He was. He was in that helicopter that was shot down.”

“Where are all the people who were here? What did you do with their bodies?”

He tried to move his lips but was unable.

“They didn’t do anything with the people,” Taylor said. “He doesn’t think there was anyone here.”

"If there was no one here, how did he get shot down?"

Taylor closed her eyes. A moment later she said, "A missile brought down his helicopter. He thinks the missile was fired by remote. The Elgen left him and his crew. He's the only survivor."

I looked into the man's eyes. "Where are our people?"

He suddenly forced open his mouth. "No . . ."

"He never saw anyone else on the ground. No one tried to kill him or save him. Then the Elgen fired . . . I don't know what this is . . . *Napalm* . . . over the site while he was on the ground."

"Napalm," Jack said. "That stuff Ostin was talking about."

Taylor nodded. "Napalm. That's it." She looked up at me. "He hates the Elgen."

"So do I," I said. "And he's still one of them."

The man grimaced. "No . . ."

"He says he's no Elgen," Taylor said.

I turned to Abigail. "Get him some water. And get Scott."

Abigail ran back to the van. She returned with a bottle of water. Scott was with her.

"Is there a hospital in Naco?" I asked.

"There's the Red Cross clinic in Naco, but he'll need a hospital. There's a good hospital in Bisbee."

"Could we save his life?"

Scott looked at the man. "Maybe. If he can survive the ride."

"He's lasted this long," Zeus said.

"Do you want me to help him?" Abigail asked.

I didn't answer but glanced at Taylor. She nodded. "We're not like them, Michael."

After a moment I turned back to Abigail. "All right. Help him."

Abigail knelt down next to the man and touched him on the shoulder. He gasped out in relief, and his eyes filled with tears. I opened the bottle of water, then put it next to his cracked lips and slowly poured it into his mouth. He drank greedily, choking a little on it.

The man looked up at me, then Abigail. "Thank . . ." It was all he could get out.

"It's okay," she said.

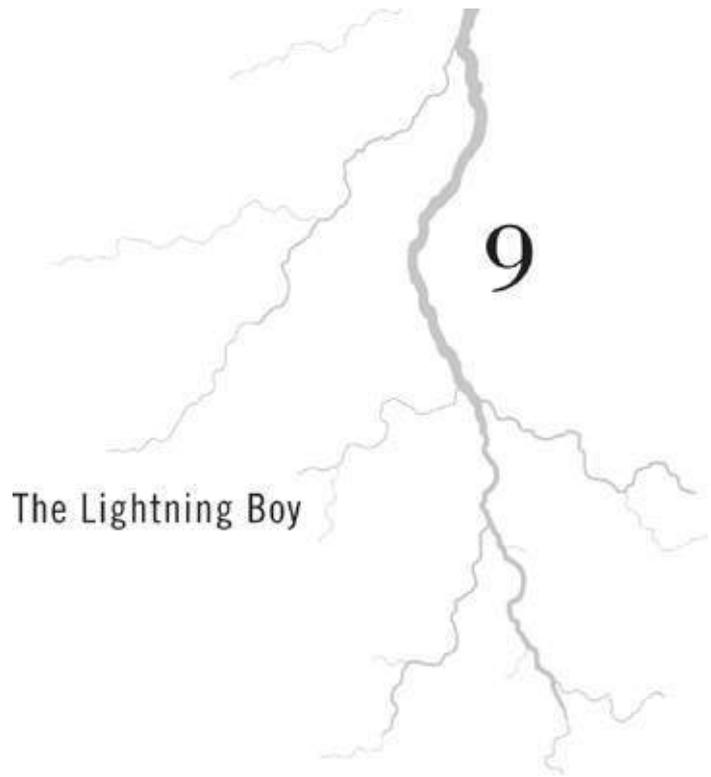
"What are you thinking?" Jack asked me.

"He knows all about the attack. He knows all about the Elgen. The Elgen think he's dead, so if he really hates the Elgen, he won't be afraid to talk. He can help us find them."

"If we can keep him alive," Jack said.

“Then let’s keep him alive,” I said.

Scott looked at me, then nodded. “All right. Let’s get him back to America.”



I had assumed we would return from the ranch knowing what had happened to my mother and friends, but now I had more questions than answers. I didn't know what to think. No one could have survived an attack of the magnitude that destroyed the ranch. But why hadn't we found any sign of our friends? No bodies, no bones, there was not one shred of evidence that anyone had been there.

And then there was what the guard had said—or thought—about no one being there. *Could they all have gotten away?* For the first time in days, I felt hopeful.

I looked down to see Taylor running her fingers along my arm across my new markings. "I hope it doesn't go away. I think it looks cool."

"I hope it fades a little. I look painted."

"You're pretty painted." She ran her finger along my arm for a little while longer, then said, "Do you really think they're alive?"

I suppose that I was getting used to her reading my mind, as her question didn't surprise me. Half the time I don't think she even knew she was doing it.

"I don't know. There were at least fifty people there. How could there have been no sign of anyone? And what the guard said . . ."

Taylor shook her head. "You're right, it doesn't make sense. But why would the voice tell us there were no survivors?"

"Do you think the voice always tells the truth?"

"I don't know."

"Would you lie to save my life?" I asked.

Taylor didn't hesitate. "Of course."

"Would you lie to save the world?"

"Of course," she repeated.

"Me too," I said. "I think the voice will say whatever he has to to help the cause."

"But why would telling us everyone's dead help the cause?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Maybe the guard knows something."

"I just hope he makes it to the hospital alive."

* * *

We had laid the guard in the back of the van on the floor of the cargo area, and Abigail and Jack sat in back with him. As we approached the Mexican town of Naco, Scott said, "We'll go straight to the Red Cross clinic and get him help. Zeus, Tessa, Jack, and Abigail will stay with him while the rest of us get our bags from the hotel. Will someone collect the room keys?"

"I'll do it," Taylor said.

Everyone handed their keys to Taylor.

"They'll probably need me at the Red Cross to translate," Ostin said.

"You're right," Scott said. "McKenna, you're still with us."

"No worries," she said.

We pulled into the dirt parking lot of the Red Cross building, and Ostin ran inside. A moment later two Mexican men, one of them wearing a blue doctor's smock, came out carrying a cloth stretcher. Jack opened the back doors.

The doctor gasped when he saw the guard. "*¡Qué espantoso!*"

Jack helped the men lift the guard and carry him inside, followed by Zeus, Abigail, Ostin, and Tessa.

Scott climbed back inside the van, and the rest of us drove just a few blocks back to our hotel. When we arrived, Taylor, Nichelle, McKenna, Ian, and I went to the rooms to collect everyone's things. As we carried the luggage out to the van, a young Mexican man standing across the street in front of the hotel suddenly pointed at me and shouted, "*¡El niño relámpago! ¡El niño relámpago!*"

"What's he saying?" Taylor asked.

“¡Allí está el niño relámpago!”

“He’s calling you ‘the lightning boy,’” Scott said, walking up to me. “How would he know that?”

“He might have been one of the gang members who attacked me,” I said.

“Might?” Scott said.

“I don’t know. It was dark. We weren’t posing for selfies.”

People began walking out of buildings to see what the man was shouting about.

“I’ve got this,” Taylor said. “Nichelle, can you amplify me?”

“Sure,” she said, taking Taylor’s hand.

Taylor reached her other hand toward the kid and closed her eyes. He abruptly stopped shouting. Then he and the people around him suddenly looked confused, as if they’d all forgotten why there were standing in the street—which was likely true.

“You’re so cool,” I said.

“Thank you,” Taylor said. “And thanks to Nichelle. I usually can’t reboot so many people at once.”

“No problem,” Nichelle said.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Scott said. “Who knows how many people this clown’s told. Word will spread quickly in a place like this.”

Taylor and Nichelle kept the crowd confused as we finished throwing the bags into the back of the van and climbed in. We sped back to the Red Cross.

The small clinic was crowded, and Jack waved us over to where our friends were gathered. The guard was lying on a small cot with an IV going into his arm. A doctor was standing next to him, spraying his wounds with something. The rest of our group was standing a few yards from him, watching.

“What’s going on?” I asked Ostin.

“They gave him some pain medicine and some antibiotics,” Ostin said.

“They also gave him an IV for his dehydration,” Abigail said. “The doctor says they need to take him to a hospital in Sonora.”

“No,” Scott said. “We need to get out of Mexico. Does the doctor speak English?”

“I speak English,” the doctor said, with only a slight accent. “Do you know this man?”

“He was at our ranch in the desert. There was an explosion.”

“We heard explosions a few days ago,” the doctor said. “Were there others hurt?”

“He’s the only one we know of,” Scott said. “We’ll take him over the border to Bisbee to the Copper Queen hospital.”

“Copper Queen is good,” the doctor said, nodding. “They’re better prepared for burn trauma.”

“We’ll take him immediately,” Scott said.

“What’s the hurry?” Ostin whispered.

“Someone recognized Michael,” Nichelle said. “They’re calling him ‘the lightning boy.’ By the time we left the hotel, a crowd had gathered.”

“I was afraid of that,” Ostin said.

The doctor finished wrapping the man’s burn with gauze, and then two men carried the guard back out to our van with the IV needle still in his arm, the tube connected to a bag of saline that we hung from one of the van’s clothes hooks.

Fortunately, the traffic at the border crossing back into the United States was light, with just three cars ahead of us.

“This could be tricky,” Scott said. “Transporting an undocumented burn victim across the border.”

“I know a way to get across the border.” I turned back to Taylor. “Remember the mind trick you did in Peru at the Starxource plant? Could you do that again?”

“Yes. I’ll need someone to translate.”

“This guy will speak English,” Ostin said. “They’re American border guards.”

“What if it doesn’t work this time?” Abigail asked.

“It will work,” Jack said. “If not, Michael, Zeus, and I will take the place down.”

“No,” Scott said. “No fighting unless they try to arrest us. We can’t draw attention to ourselves. This place has massive video surveillance.”

“Zeus can take out the video,” Jack said.

Zeus nodded. “It’s my specialty.”

“But we still don’t know how many guards are inside. The last thing we need to do is turn this into a war zone.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It won’t come to that. Taylor will get us through.”

“I hope so,” Scott said, pulling the van forward. “Because we’re here.”

We drove past a blue-and-white sign that read:

WELCOME TO THE UNITED STATES
BIENVENIDOS A LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

In front of the building was a flagpole with an American and an Immigration and Naturalization Service flag. The American border station was two stories high and constructed after traditional adobe architecture, with the butts of logs sticking out of its pale yellow stucco walls.

A long metal fence led up to the station, running parallel with a paved walkway on the east side for pedestrian traffic. There was a stop sign in the middle of the road, with the word "STOP" above the word "ALTO."

Scott pulled up to the final checkpoint before the border crossing. The uniformed and armed U.S. border guard was tall and lanky with a serious expression. It took just a few minutes before he waved the car ahead of us through and motioned us forward.

"Get ready," I said to Taylor. "It's showtime."

"I'm ready."

We pulled up to the guard and stopped.

"Good afternoon," Scott said.

The man showed no emotion. "Are you U.S. citizens?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your passports, please."

"Of course." Scott handed the guard our documents.

Suddenly the Elgen soldier groaned out loudly, and the border guard looked inside the van to see where the sound had come from. Ostin grabbed his stomach. "I knew I shouldn't have drunk the water. Can we please hurry? I might blow."

"And now I'm going to hurl," Tessa said. "You're so gross."

The border guard looked at Ostin for a moment, then back at Scott. "There are eleven of you?"

"Yes," he said.

I whispered to Taylor, "Are you ready?"

She slightly nodded. All he had to do was walk around the car to see the Elgen.

The border guard quickly looked our passports over, then, without comment, handed them back. "You're free to go."

He waved at someone inside the building, and the gate rose. I think Scott was so surprised, he didn't move.

"Go ahead," the guard said.

"Yes, sir," Scott said. "Have a good afternoon." We pulled through the border crossing.

After we had passed over the border, Ostin said, "That was, like, easy."

"It was *too* easy," Scott said.

"Maybe someone wants us back in the U.S.," Ostin said.

"That's a scary thought," I said. "Since nobody is supposed to know we're here."

* * *

About a half mile from the border, Scott pulled into the parking lot of a small taqueria and put the van in park. He reached over to the glove box and took out a hand radio.

"I'm going to radio Boyd and see if he's seen anything suspicious." He pushed a button on the radio. "Come in, Albatross, come in." There was no response. "Albatross, come in. This is Falcon." Still no response.

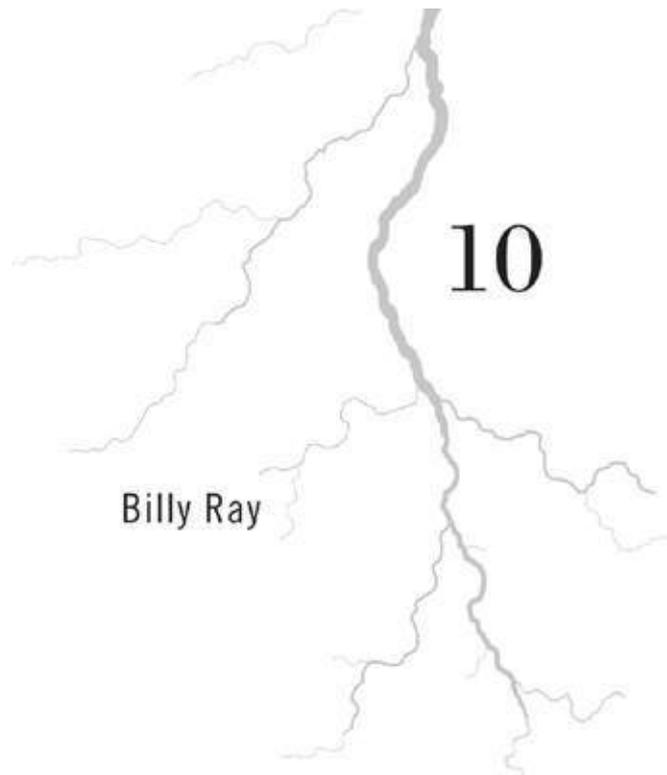
"Maybe he's at dinner," Taylor said.

"He should have his radio with him at all times," Scott said. "Come in, Albatross. Over." He checked the radio's settings, then lifted the radio one more time. "Come in, Albatross. Are you there?"

Still nothing.

"This is strange," Scott said, pulling back out into the road. "Everyone, stay alert. Especially you, Ian. Something's not right."

"It never is," Taylor said softly. "It never is."



On the way into the town of Bisbee, we passed a massive, terraced, open-pit copper mine several hundred feet deep. The town itself was beautiful, built in the lap of a mountain, with buildings climbing higher and higher up the foothills until the mountain's incline allowed no more.

The town had started to die after the mine closed in the seventies, then hippies found it and made it thrive again. Because it was a copper town, many of the buildings' roofs were covered with copper paneling and shingles. Copper is a powerful conductor of electricity, which may have had something to do with why I felt so different in the city. Stronger. More electric. As if I needed that.

When we reached downtown Bisbee, Scott followed the local road signs to Copper Queen hospital. We pulled up to the ER and parked the van; then Scott ran inside while Jack opened the back door and he and Abigail got out. Less than a minute later Scott returned followed by a doctor and two aides pushing a metal gurney.

"What happened?" the doctor asked.

"We think there was an explosion," Scott said.

"What do you mean, you 'think'?" the doctor said curtly. "Either there was or wasn't one."

“We weren’t there,” Scott said. “We found him by the side of the road.”

“Do you have any idea what kind of explosion?”

“No. We just saw burning debris around. Maybe a fuel tank exploded or something.”

The guard groaned out again as the techs lifted the man onto the gurney.

“So he’s not with your group,” the doctor said.

“No. We were headed down to a Mexican dude ranch for a weekend church retreat when we found this man about a quarter mile from the main road. He was nearly unconscious. We drove him to Naco, but they weren’t equipped to help him.”

The doctor examined the guard some more, then said, “Peculiar. I haven’t seen burns like that since . . .” He hesitated, then looked up at Scott. “I saw this in Vietnam. They look like napalm burns.”

Ostin almost said something, but Scott stopped him. “Like I said, we don’t know what happened.”

We followed the doctor and techs into the hospital. At the operating room door the doctor turned to Abigail. “Young lady, you’ll need to let go of his hand.”

The guard gripped her hand tighter. He must have figured out that she was taking away his pain.

“He needs me,” Abigail said. “For support.”

The doctor hesitated. “All right. You’ll have to scrub up, though. And get gloved.”

“Can her power work through latex?” Taylor whispered.

I shrugged.

After Abigail and the doctor disappeared into the ER, a nurse led the rest of us out to the waiting room. As we walked down the hallway, the nurse looked down at my arm. “Excuse me for asking, but were you struck by lightning?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. Finally I said, “How did you know?”

“Lichtenberg figures,” she said. “I’ve only seen them in manuals. That must have been very painful.”

“It wasn’t too bad,” I said.

Her brow rose. “Wasn’t too bad? They’re electricity burns. They’re some of the worst kind.”

“I guess I was a little out of it when it happened,” I said. I quickly walked away from her and sat down on a couch while Scott, Ian, Zeus, and Tessa went outside to keep watch. Nichelle asked for a pencil from

the registration desk, then sat in the corner sketching while Jack, Taylor, Ostin, McKenna, and I sat on the sofa across from her.

"The guard's name is Billy Ray," Taylor said. "He was raised by his grandmother. She's ninety-two and still alive."

"Elgen guards don't have grandmas," Jack said. "They're not born; they're spawned. And they don't have names. Just *Elgen*."

Taylor continued. "He's from Huntsville, Alabama."

"That's so weird that he's from somewhere," McKenna said.

"Everyone's from somewhere," Ostin replied.

"I know, but it still seems weird. It's like thinking about where Colby Cross went to elementary school, you know?"

"Or Hitler," Jack added.

"Where do you think Hatch is from?" Ostin asked.

"Hell," Jack said without hesitation.

"It's not an accident, you know," I said to Taylor.

"What's not an accident?" Taylor asked.

"That he's letting you know about him," I said. "He's doing it for a reason."

"Why?"

"So you would help him live."

"I don't get the connection."

"It's harder to kill people you know. That's why in wars the first thing they do is dehumanize the enemy. They're not people like us; they're gooks or krauts, or infidels or Charlie. After you know they have a family, that they're somebody's son or grandson . . . it's a different thing."

"He's right," Jack said. "My brother was stationed in Afghanistan at a combat outpost when the Taliban attacked them. A Taliban soldier tried to stab my brother, but my brother turned the knife on the guy."

"While my brother's squad was waiting for reinforcements, my brother had to sit in the room with the dead man for two hours. He took out the guy's wallet. The man had a picture of his wife and a little boy. My brother said even though the guy had tried to kill him, it still made him sad. . . ."

Jack's words trailed off into silence. A few minutes later Scott walked into the waiting room from outside. "Any word on his condition?" he asked.

"No," Taylor said.

"See anything?" I asked.

“No. Neither has Ian. It doesn’t appear that we were followed. But that doesn’t explain why they let us across the border so easily.”

“Maybe we were just lucky,” Ostin said.

“Since when have we been lucky?” Taylor replied.

“We’re still alive, aren’t we?” Nichelle said, suddenly joining the conversation. “I’d say we’ve been pretty lucky.”

Nichelle’s optimism surprised me. “Any word from Boyd?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Scott said. “I’m going to have to drive back to Douglas to check things out. I’ll need some backup.”

“So after we find him, then what?” I asked.

Scott sat down next to us. He leaned in, his hands clasped in his lap. “There’s a safe house in Albuquerque,” he said softly. “Assuming we still have a plane, I think we should fly there and wait to hear from the voice.”

“The last safe house wasn’t so *safe*,” Jack said.

“Nothing’s safe anymore. We don’t know what information has been leaked, but it’s still our best option.”

“I want to go back to Idaho and get my parents,” Taylor said.

“We will,” Scott said. “But I need to get you to safety first, then go get them.”

“You should talk to your mother first,” I said. “You need to make sure that they’re still in Boise.”

Ostin said, “If the Elgen have their phone lines traced, they’ll track the call back here. Just seeing a call this close to the border, they’ll know we’re back.”

“Then we should make the call just before we leave Arizona,” Scott said.

“What about the guard?” McKenna asked. “He’s not going to be ready to go by tomorrow.”

“We can’t all stay here until he’s better,” Scott said. “It’s too risky.”

“Abi and I can stay with him,” Jack said. “Then we’ll meet up with you.”

“I don’t like breaking us up again,” I said. “The last time we did that, we were captured.”

“It’s better than all of us being captured,” Jack said.

“We don’t know if what he knows is worth losing any of us,” I said.

“Michael’s right,” Scott said. “We’ll all stay in Douglas tonight, then fly out in the morning. We can come back for the guard later.” His brow furrowed. “But first I need to find my copilot.”



We left the hospital in Bisbee and drove from Bisbee twenty-three miles back to Douglas to the hotel where we planned to spend the night: the Hotel Gadsden, a tall, historic building that looked as old as the city and was, by far, the largest structure on the aged main street.

"I've heard about this place," Ostin said. "It's on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. It's been used in a bunch of movies. They say that room 333 is haunted."

Tessa rolled her eyes. "Haunted? Really? I thought you were smart."

"I am," Ostin said. "And yes, I believe in ghosts, spirits, and paranormal beings."

We parked on the street in front of the hotel and walked inside. The hotel's lobby was high ceilinged and surprisingly beautiful, with tall, marble columns extending to the ceiling. Across the wall on the split stairway leading up to the indoor balcony was a forty-foot-wide Tiffany mural of the Mexican desert.

"I want to stay in room 333," Nichelle said. "I've always wanted to see a ghost."

"There are no such things as ghosts," Tessa said.

"I'm glad you feel that way," Nichelle said. "You can be my roommate."

We followed Scott up to the check-in counter. "Do you have any vacancies for tonight?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the clerk said, looking us over. He was a fortysomething blond man with a name tag that read TOM. I noticed that his eyes lingered on the scars on my arm.

"I need six rooms for the night," Scott said. "Double occupancy."

"We can accommodate that. May I see a credit card?"

Scott took out his wallet and showed the man his ID. "We should have an account here."

"Just a moment," he said, looking at his computer. "Of course. It's good to have you back, Mr. Allen. Shall I put all the rooms on the same account?"

"Yes, please."

"I see the last time you were here, you stayed in 110, our Jacuzzi suite. Would you like the same room, or do you have a preference?"

"We'll just be staying in your regular rooms this time," Scott said. "The historic rooms."

"I want room 333," Nichelle said.

Tom looked over at her with a half smile. "So you've heard of our ghost."

Nichelle nodded. "Have you seen a ghost?"

"Once," he said. "In the basement. The power had gone out, so I went down there with a flashlight to check the fuse box. Suddenly the hair on the back of my neck rose, and I had this feeling that I was being watched. Then I saw a cloud in the shape of a man come toward me."

"That's creepy," Taylor said.

"A *cloud* in the shape of a man?" Tessa said. "That's bogus."

"Ah, a skeptic," Tom said. "At least once a week I hear something about a ghost from a guest. Especially from those staying in room 333. Once we had a movie crew stay here while they were filming a documentary on the old West. One of the cameramen said his room's light kept flipping on and off all night; then something threw all of his clothes off their hangers in the closet."

"I'm pretty sure that was an episode of *Scooby-Doo*," Tessa said.

Tom just smiled. "Another time a woman, a college professor, told me that she felt someone get into bed with her. When she rolled over to see who it was, no one was there."

"She was probably just lonely and dreamed it," Tessa said.

"Maybe, but *she* certainly believed it. She had reserved the room for three nights, but she packed up and checked out in the middle of the

night. We have an entire binder filled with supernatural accounts recorded by our guests. Most are simple things, lights or televisions turning on and off in the night, or strange sounds coming from the radiator. Especially in room 333.”

“All old radiators make strange sounds,” Tessa said. “Old buildings make noises.”

“You may be right, but after hearing these stories for the last ten years, you begin to think that there must be something going on.”

“Logically, I’d come to that conclusion,” Ostin said. “Though it’s possible that the expectation created by previous ghost stories might create an expectant psychological environment for mob hysteria.”

Tom just stared at Ostin.

“He always talks that way,” Tessa said. “It’s annoying.”

“Actually, I was admiring his vocabulary,” Tom said, handing out our room keys. “And here is 333 for you,” he said, handing the key to Nichelle.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Is there a restaurant nearby?” Ostin asked. “I’m starving.”

“Yes, sir. We have our famous Saddle and Spur Tavern just behind you to your right.”

While we were getting our keys, Scott took out his cell phone to make a call. I glanced over at him. He looked as frightened as if he had seen a ghost. He hung up his phone, shaking his head. “I can’t believe it.”

We all turned to him.

“What?” I asked.

“The plane is gone.”

“What do you mean *gone*?” Zeus said.

“Boyd flew out the same night we landed.”

“Why would he do that?” Tessa asked.

“There’s no reason. . . .” He stopped, the look of concern evident on his face. “There’s no *good* reason.”

“Could he have been working with the Elgen?” Zeus asked.

“I’ve known him since he was nineteen. He wouldn’t leave without us unless”—he closed his eyes—“something bad happened.”

Taylor looked at Scott. “What do we do now?”

“I need to go over to the airport and see if anyone knows what’s going on,” Scott said. “Ian, could you give me a hand?”

“No worries.”

“And, Tessa, we could use some amplification powers.”

“Yeah, I’m down.”

“I’ll go too,” Zeus said, taking Tessa’s hand. “In case we need some firepower.”

“We should all go,” I said.

“No,” Scott said. “I think it’s best we not keep all our eggs in one basket. I’ll take Ian, Tessa, and Zeus. Michael, I want you to keep everyone else together.”

“How long will you be?” I asked.

“It’s only twenty minutes from here, so no more than two hours. If you haven’t heard from us by then, you’ll know something’s wrong.”

“All right, we’ll stay together until we hear from you,” I said. “Call our room if you have news.”

“Which room will you be in?” Scott asked.

“The haunted one,” Nichelle said.



After Scott left with Ian, Zeus, and Tessa, the rest of us followed Ostin over to the hotel restaurant, the Saddle and Spur Tavern. The restaurant appeared to have been newly renovated, and the textured plaster walls were painted pale yellow and decorated with the markings of dozens of different cattle brands. The floor was made from stained, dark wood planks, and against the main wall there was a long bar with chrome-and-black-vinyl barstools. On the opposite side of the room was a brightly lit jukebox.

We pushed two tables together and sat down. Less than a minute later a waitress walked out to us.

“Hi, y’all. I’m Carla. How are you youngsters tonight?”

“Fine, thank you,” Taylor said for all of us. I don’t know how long it had been since anyone had called me a youngster.

“You must be headed to Mexico on vacation.”

“We just got back,” Taylor said.

“Oh? What did you see?”

“Carnage,” Ostin said.

McKenna gave him a scolding look.

“Mexicans,” I said. “Mostly.”

The waitress laughed. “I suppose you would.”

"So is this place really haunted?" Nichelle asked.

"Sure is, honey."

"Have you seen a ghost?"

"Not the headless phantom you hear everyone talk about, but every now and then the electricity in here will go kind of haywire, blenders turning on, lights turning on and off, lights flickering."

"Sounds like bad electrical wiring," Ostin said.

"I thought you said you believe in ghosts," I said.

"I do. But I'm logical about it."

The woman grinned. "All the electrical was redone last January when we remodeled the dining room. A while back we had a ghost expert come through here. He was from one of those ghost hunter TV shows. He said that ghosts and poltergeists are really just electrical energy, so they're attracted to electricity. Some say they eat electricity."

"Great," I said. "That makes us a banquet."

Taylor playfully punched me on the arm.

"We're definitely going to see some ghosts tonight," Ostin said.

The woman looked at us with a quizzical expression, then said, "So, down to business. What can I get y'all to eat?"

"We all want lemonade," Taylor said.

"Except me," Ostin said. "I'll have a root beer."

"Six lemonades, one root beer."

". . . And throw in a couple of orders of these bacon-wrapped jalapeño poppers," Ostin said.

"All right. I'll get those going; then I'll be back to get the rest of your order." She walked away.

After she was gone, Nichelle said, "If ghosts are electric, I should be able to feel their presence. Maybe even affect them."

"That would be cool," Ostin said. "You could be like the ghost punisher."

"Can we stop talking about ghosts?" Taylor said. "It's creeping me out. And we already have enough to worry about."

"Yeah, like paying for dinner," I said, realizing I only had Taiwanese NT and pesos. "Does anyone have any American dollars?"

"I'm sure we can charge it to the room," Ostin said.

When our waitress returned, we ordered bean-and-cheese burritos, a taco salad, beef tacos, and chicken fried steak. After we finished eating, I said, "We better go up to the room, in case Scott calls."

"I'm going to stop at the front desk and see if they'll let me borrow their ghost binder," Ostin said.

"I want to read that too," Nichelle said.

We charged our meals to the room, then stopped at the front desk. The clerk let Ostin sign out the ghost book, and he took it with him as we went to the third floor, room 333. The room was at the end of a long corridor, lit eerily by green lights.

"Look," Taylor said when we reached the room. The door had been painted dark green, and people had scratched names and messages into the door. Someone had scratched a 666, and someone had crossed it out and scratched the word "JESUS" above it with a cross.

The hotel's "historic rooms" were a sharp contrast to the splendor of the lobby.

"This looks like my old room in Pasadena," Nichelle said, looking around.

"They must not have gotten around to remodeling this part of the hotel," Taylor said.

"They did," Ostin said. "It was just sixty years ago."

"It's just one night," I said. "It still beats camping in the jungle."

While Ostin, Taylor, McKenna, Abigail, Jack, and Nichelle looked over the ghost book, I lay down to take a quick nap. I must have been more tired than I realized, because just a few minutes later I fell asleep. When I woke, Taylor was sitting next to me on the bed.

"How long have I been asleep?" I asked.

"About an hour."

I looked at my watch. "Has Scott called?"

"No."

"How long has it been?" McKenna asked.

"Almost two and a half hours," Ostin said.

"He said two hours at the most," Nichelle said, looking up from the ghost binder.

"They'll call," Taylor said.

"What if he doesn't?" Nichelle asked.

I looked over at Jack, who also looked concerned. I was really blinking. "Well, there's not much we can do this late at night," I said. "We don't even have a car."

"I can hot-wire a car," Jack said.

"And go where?" Taylor asked.

"The closest big city is Tucson," Ostin said. "It's about a hundred miles north of here. We should go there."

I thought for a second, then said, "If we haven't heard from Scott by four a.m., we'll find a car and drive to Tucson. In the meantime we stay

together in the same room. And everyone should try to get some sleep. It might be a while before we get the chance again. I'll keep watch."

"I'll keep watch with you," Taylor said. "I'm not that tired." She yawned almost immediately after saying that.

While everyone else slept, Taylor and I sat on the burgundy shag carpet next to the door, listening for sounds from the hallway. It was quiet until a little after one in the morning, when there was a sudden rush of footsteps. At first I thought we were under attack by an Elgen patrol, but as I looked out the peephole, it was just a bunch of college kids who had probably come down to the border for a wild weekend.

About a half hour later Taylor fell asleep. I lay back against the door trying to keep my eyes open. Fortunately I had a lot to think about. And I was ticking a lot, which always makes it harder to sleep. I thought about the ghost, too. If there were such a thing, I wondered if I could shock it. Or scare it. *Do ghosts get scared?*

Around two thirty in the morning the radiator began making a strange knocking sound in a distinct pattern, almost like someone was tapping out a code on it. I wished that Ostin were awake to decipher it. I was intrigued, but it didn't frighten me. I was more afraid of what I knew existed in the world than something that I couldn't see. *Why hadn't Scott called? What could have happened to them?*

I must have fallen asleep a little after that, because I woke with a start. I was lying with my face next to the door, and I could hear slow, heavy footsteps in the hallway. I heard them go up and down the corridor, finally stopping near us. I quietly stood and looked out the peephole. There was a man dressed in black standing two doors down on the other side of the hallway in front of Ostin's and my room.

I watched him for a moment, then carefully woke Taylor, holding my hand over her mouth to keep her from making a sound. She looked at me with a confused expression. "Someone's out there," I whispered. "Wake Jack."

Taylor crawled over to the bed and gently shook Jack.

"Wha . . ."

She put her hand over his mouth. "Shhh. There's someone outside."

The man tried the door handle again; then he took something out of his pocket, slid it into the door lock, turned the handle, and went inside.

"He picked the lock," I whispered. "He's inside my room."

While Taylor woke everyone else, Jack went into the bathroom. He came out wielding the towel bar like a club in one hand. Everyone else gathered around the door.

"Now he's going into the room across from us," I said.

"My room," Jack said.

"Is he Elgen?" Ostin asked.

"I can't tell. He's wearing all black and a face mask. I think he has a gun."

"You can see a gun?" Jack asked.

"No, he's wearing a vest. But it has a bulge."

"I wish Ian were here," Taylor said.

"I wish they were all here," I said.

"How many are there?" Jack asked.

"Just one," I said. "That I can see. But if he's Elgen, you know he has backup."

"This is like Taiwan all over again," McKenna said.

"Except this time we're only on the fourth floor," Ostin said. He walked over to the window and looked out. "There's a roof about fifteen feet down, then another about the same. We can tie bedsheets together and climb down."

"Good idea," I said.

"What's the plan?" Jack asked.

"When he touches the doorknob, Michael can shock him," Taylor said. "Then we escape."

"Bad idea," Ostin said. "If he has backup, they'll know we're here and storm our room."

I thought for a moment. "He's going into the rooms alone," I said softly. "I say we let him in. If it's just him, we can take him. If he's here with backup, we need to make them think everything's okay until we have time to escape." I turned back. "Ostin, Abi, McKenna, and Nichelle, you guys take the sheets into the bathroom and tie them into a rope.

"When he gets to this room, we'll let him enter. Then, once he's inside, Taylor reboots him, Jack tackles him to the ground, and I'll shock him unconscious. Then I'll lock the door while Jack disarms him and ties him up.

"Then we'll lock him in the bathroom and climb out the window." I looked at Jack. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a good plan," Jack said. "As long as they're not waiting for us outside."

"Can you take him down with your broken ribs?" I asked.

"What ribs?" he replied.

"All right," I said. "Let's do this."

Ostin and the three girls pulled the sheets from the beds, then took them into the bathroom to make a rope while I looked out the door's peephole. Jack crouched down behind Taylor.

"You should put some pillows down so when he hits the floor, it's not so loud," Taylor said.

Jack frowned. "You're right."

"What, you don't like that?"

"I was just looking forward to body slamming an Elgen guard onto the floor," Jack said.

Taylor put her hand on my back so she could read my mind and see what I was seeing. A minute later the man came out of the room across from us. Then he turned and looked at our door.

He's coming, I thought.

Taylor leaned back and whispered into Jack's ear.

The man touched our doorknob; then I heard something metallic slide inside the lock. I glanced over at Taylor, who had moved to my left side so the man wouldn't see her before he entered.

Don't reboot him until he's inside the room, I thought.

Taylor nodded.

The lock clicked. The doorknob slowly turned; then the door began to open. The man was halfway inside the room before he saw Taylor and me crouched down behind the door.

Now, I thought.

Taylor bowed her head. The man froze with confusion. Jack grabbed him by the front of his shirt, then pulled him forward, slamming him face-forward to the ground. I pushed the door shut with my foot as I grabbed the man's leg and pulsed. His body went limp.

Jack pulled the man's gun from its holster, pinning the man down with his knee in the small of his back. "We got him."

"Ostin, let's get out of here," I said.

"Still working on it," he said.

"Work faster," I said. "Taylor, open the window."

Taylor tried to open the window but couldn't. It had been painted shut.

"You better help her," I said to Jack, keeping my hand on the prone man. "Ostin, hurry!"

Jack got up and, after several attempts, pushed the window open. Then Ostin and the others came out of the bathroom carrying their makeshift rope. Ostin tied one end of the sheets around the radiator, then threw the opposite end out the window.

"You sure those knots are tight?" Jack asked.

Ostin nodded. "It will hold. I'd bet my life on it."

"Good," he said, turning back. "Because you're going first."

Jack came back over and put his knee into the small of our prisoner's back. The man was wearing cargo pants and a black, long-sleeve shirt, but nothing with the Elgen insignia. He also wore a knit mask with slits for eyes.

"I want to see this guy's face," I said to Jack. "Let's roll him over."

We rolled the unconscious man to his back; then Jack pulled off his mask.

Taylor gasped.

"I don't believe it," Jack said.

"Better hold up," I said to Ostin, who was nervously straddling the windowsill, about to climb out.

"What?" He looked back at the man. "Do you know who it is?"

"Yes," I said. "Let's lift him onto the bed."

"You know this guy?" Nichelle asked.

"His name is Gervaso. And he's not supposed to be alive."



McKenna turned the room light on while Jack and I lifted Gervaso up onto one of the beds. Jack checked him again for weapons and this time found a Special Ops knife in a sheath strapped to his right shin. Jack unstrapped the sheath and slid it into his own belt while everyone else gathered around the bed.

“How do you know him?” Nichelle asked.

“He was our trainer from the resistance,” McKenna said.

“Then he’s a good guy?”

“He was,” Ostin said. “We don’t know what he’s doing here. Or why he’s alive and everyone else is dead.”

“Maybe he betrayed the others,” Nichelle said.

“He wouldn’t betray them,” Jack said. “He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. He’s above reproach.”

“Then why did you just take his weapons?” Nichelle asked.

Jack looked a little awkward. “Better safe than sorry,” he said.

“Taylor, keep your hand on him. When he comes to, I want to interrogate him,” I said.

Gervaso was out for only a couple of more minutes before he began to stir. As soon as he came to, he instinctively went for his gun, and froze when he saw Jack pointing it at him.

"Just stay still," Jack said. "Don't try anything."

Gervaso looked back and forth between us, his eyes stopping on me. "Michael, it's me, Gervaso."

"We thought you were dead," I said.

"Do I look dead?" He stared at me. "What happened to your arms?"

"Just answer the question," Jack said. "Why are you still alive?"

"Because I didn't die," he said. Then he slightly grinned. "Well, at least not yet." He said to Jack, "You can put my gun down. I came here to rescue you."

Jack looked over at me, and I nodded. He lowered the weapon.

"Where are Scott and the others?" Taylor asked.

"They're safe. This town is crawling with Elgen informants. That's why I came back alone. We need to get you out of here." He sat up. "You don't need to keep touching me, Taylor. You know I'm not lying."

Taylor looked a little embarrassed as she removed her hand. "He's telling the truth," she said to me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Are my parents dead?" Ostin asked.

Gervaso looked at him. "No," he said.

"But we saw the ranch," I said.

"We knew the Elgen were coming. We evacuated before they came."

"My mother's alive?" I asked.

"Everyone is safe. Your mother"—he turned to Ostin—"your parents, the council."

I put my hand over my eyes, overcome with relief. "She's okay."

Taylor took my hand. "I knew there was hope."

When I looked up, Ostin's eyes were filled with tears. He furtively brushed them away. McKenna put her arms around him.

"Dude, it's okay," Jack said. "Even warriors cry."

Ostin just nodded.

"I don't get it," Jack said to Gervaso. "If you knew the Elgen were coming, why didn't you ambush them?"

"There's brave courageous; then there's brave *stupid*," Gervaso said, looking at Jack. "You know what I mean?"

Jack nodded. "Yeah, I get it."

"Even with the intelligence we had, the Elgen still have a lot more firepower at their disposal than we do. They also have an army, which we don't. But even if we had somehow defeated them, there would have been lives lost. And, as far as I'm concerned, we don't have any to spare." He looked at me. "Would you agree?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I thought so," he said. "But that's just one of the reasons we didn't attack. The main reason was that fighting back wasn't our strategy. We want them to think we've been destroyed."

"If no one was at the ranch," Ostin said, "how did we bring down one of their helicopters? We saw it."

Gervaso smiled. "That was pretty good, wasn't it? Remember the robotic sentry system we used in Peru? Same thing. I also fired up our helicopter from here in Douglas. We gambled that they'd never put boots on the ground, so I created just enough action for them to believe we'd been caught unprepared."

"Smart," Ostin said. "Very smart."

"So what about the Elgen guard we found?" Jack said. "What do we do with him?"

"Scott briefed me about him," Gervaso said. "He provides us with an interesting opportunity. And risk. The Elgen don't know that he's still alive, and from what I've been told, he's bitter enough to tell us everything he knows. I don't blame him. The Elgen not only abandoned him; they dropped napalm on him and his buddies."

"Fortunately, his uniform was mostly burned off. Otherwise word of his survival might have already gotten back to the Elgen, but that doesn't mean we're safe. Every Elgen guard is implanted with an RFID—radio-frequency identification—so he can still be traced. Probably the only reason they haven't already found him is that they aren't looking."

"In the morning, a doctor we know will be removing the RFID device. Then I'll be less worried. In the meantime, he's in serious condition. It will be weeks before he'll be stable enough to move."

"I still don't get it," Taylor said. "Why did the voice tell us there were no survivors at the ranch?"

"Because there weren't," Gervaso said. "Everyone was gone."

"Why didn't they just tell us that in the first place?" she asked. "Don't they care how we suffered?"

"I know it must have been awful for you," Gervaso said. "To think your parents and friends were dead. But we sacrificed our main headquarters just so the Elgen would believe we were wiped out. All we needed was one intercepted message for that sacrifice to have been in vain. The greater good dictated that we employ *misinformation*."

"That's a military way of saying 'lie,'" Ostin said.

"He's right," I said. "They did the right thing."

"So where is everyone?" Ostin asked. "Where are my parents?"

“Until we’re out of danger, it’s best that you don’t know. But they’re safe, and you’ll see them soon enough. Let’s leave it at that.”

“So now what?” I asked. “Is our plane really gone?”

Gervaso nodded. “It wouldn’t have been difficult for the Elgen to track down our plane, so we had Boyd fly it out shortly after you landed. We tried to stop you from going to Mexico, but we were two hours too late.”

“What do you think we should do?” I asked.

“We’re going to drive to Tucson, then wait for directions from the voice on where we need to go. There are a lot of pieces in play right now. We need to see our opponents’ next move.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“You saved Jade Dragon and escaped. Hatch isn’t going to be very happy about that. And when Hatch is unhappy, heads roll. The question is, whose heads and how high up are they? If we can get some high-level defections, it could turn the tide against him. Hatch’s electric youths were in charge of guarding you. It will be interesting to see if he holds them responsible.”

“Hatch isn’t afraid to punish his kids,” Nichelle said.

Gervaso looked over at Nichelle, suddenly realizing who she was. “You’re Nichelle, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Hatch’s favorite torture device.”

“Yeah, that’s also me,” she said. “Or was.”

“So you know, Hatch has imprisoned and tortured his own, but he’s never executed one of them. But his kids are getting older now, and it’s only a matter of time before one of them rebels. Of course if they turn against Hatch, it could be good or bad for us, depending on what they want.

“But there’s even more in play. The Elgen still need a land base to carry out their plans of global domination. They’ve recently purchased two new warships that are, right now, sailing to Tuvalu, as are the *Faraday* and the rest of the Elgen fleet. It looks like Hatch is going to finish what he started.”

“They’re going to declare war on Tuvalu?” Ostin asked.

Gervaso frowned. “I wouldn’t call it a *war*. The people of Tuvalu have no army and no weapons. It’s going to be a complete surrender or a complete slaughter.” He looked back at me. “So, if it’s okay with you, it’s time we got out of here. I’ve got a van parked out back.”

“Of course,” I said.

Gervaso stood. "May I have my weapons back?" he asked Jack.

"Sure." Jack handed him back his gun.

"And my knife?"

Jack smiled somewhat guiltily as he produced the knife, still admiring its blade. "I was hoping you wouldn't miss it."

Gervaso looked at him for a moment, then said, "All right. You keep it."

"Really?" Jack asked.

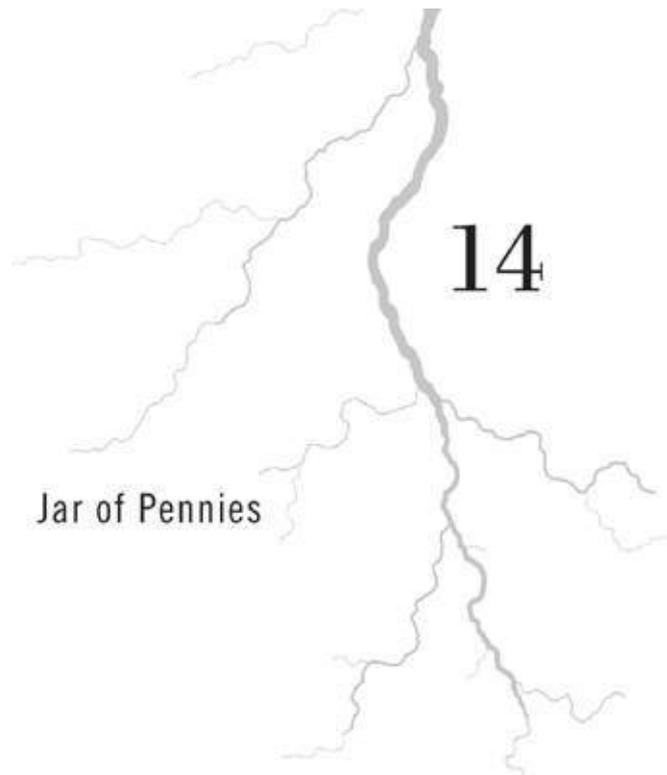
Gervaso nodded. "You pinned me. No one's ever pinned me before. You should get some prize."

"Thank you," Jack said. "This is the best gift I've ever been given."

"You earned it," Gervaso said. He turned back to me. "By the way, congratulations on your success in Taiwan. I knew you could do it."

"It was close," I said. "Hatch almost had us."

Gervaso nodded again. "Yes, but fortunately you're on the right side of 'almost.'"



We followed Gervaso down the stairwell to the main floor, then crept out the back doors of the hotel to where he had parked his van. It was still dark as we drove off.

The drive to Tucson was just a little over two hours, though I slept for most of it, waking just as we reached the city limits. I had fallen asleep in the backseat of the van, lying against Taylor. As I sat up, she combed my hair back from my face with her fingers. “Your hair is getting long.”

“Not a lot of time for haircuts,” I said.

“Too busy saving the world,” she said.

I sighed. “Yeah.”

We both looked out over the desert terrain and the approaching skyline. “That must be Tucson,” I said.

“The Old Pueblo,” Ostin said.

“The what?” McKenna asked sleepily.

“Old Pueblo. That’s Tucson’s nickname.”

“What’s a pueblo?” McKenna asked. “A Mexican city?”

“No,” Ostin said. “It’s an American Indian settlement.”

“It looks Mexican to me,” she said.

“‘Old Pueblo’ is a lame nickname,” Nichelle said.

"You think that's bad," Ostin said, "in the eighties the local newspaper ran a contest for a new nickname. The winner was 'Tucson: The Sunshine Factory.'"

"That's even more lame than 'Old Pueblo,'" Jack said from the front. "Sounds like a kids' cartoon."

"Yeah," Ostin said. "It never caught on."

"How does he know all this stuff?" Taylor asked. "His brain is like Google."

"He should be on a game show," Nichelle said. "He'd win like a billion dollars."

"Then the Elgen would find him and kill him," Taylor said.

"Yeah, that too," Nichelle said. "But at least he'd die rich."

* * *

The sun was rising above the eastern horizon as Gervaso drove past a rectangular freeway sign that read WELCOME TO TUCSON.

"What's the plan?" I asked Gervaso.

"I think everyone's pretty tired, so first we'll stop at a hotel and get some rest. Then we'll see from there."

"I've got to walk around today," McKenna said. "After all this travel I'm going stir-crazy. If the Elgen don't kill me, I'll die of boredom."

"Too much talk of death," Taylor said. "It must be on our minds."

"It's always on our minds," I said.

"Can we stop and get some bagels?" Abigail asked. "Before I die of hunger?"

"More death," Taylor said softly.

"No problem," Gervaso said. "I'm sure you're all hungry."

"Isn't there a university in Tucson?" Taylor asked.

"The University of Arizona," Ostin said. "The Wildcats."

"We could hang out on campus," I said.

"That's a good idea," Gervaso said. "You'll blend in."

"It's like that thing Ostin always says," Jack said. "'The best place to hide a penny is in a jar of pennies.'"

"I said it *once*," Ostin said.

"When are we going to meet up with Ian and the others?" I asked.

"Not for a few days," Gervaso said. "They're not in Arizona."

"Where are they?"

"Someplace safe," he said. "Someplace no one will find them."

"New York?"

"No," he said. "Utah."

* * *

We stopped for breakfast at a local bagel shop called the Bodacious Bagel. The place was crowded with college students. Even though a few of us looked a little young, Gervaso was right, we blended in. Afterward we drove toward the university looking for a hotel. We didn't have to go far.

"This looks right," Gervaso said, pulling off the busy street into the hotel's driveway. The University Inn. He parked the van in front of the lobby doors, and we all got out. Gervaso opened the back of the van, then walked inside the hotel.

As Jack threw us our bags, Taylor said, "Oh, gross."

"What?" I asked.

"I think I got Elgen *guard* on my bag."

There was a dark brown-and-white stain on the side of her canvas bag. "Is that . . . pus?"

"I'm going to throw up," McKenna said.

"I just threw up in my mouth," Taylor said.

A few minutes later Gervaso walked out of the hotel. "We're set. Everyone, two in a room. Jack, would you mind rooming with me?"

"It would be my honor," Jack said.

As Gervaso handed out room keys, he said, "Everyone, let me know if you go anywhere. I'm in room 211."

"You can share a room with me, Nichelle," Abigail said. Hearing this made me happy. I had really come to like Nichelle and her dry, self-deprecating sense of humor. I was glad Abigail had forgiven her, or was, at least, trying to.

"What do you want to do?" Taylor asked.

"Sleep," I said.

"Me too," she said. "I'll see you in a couple of hours."

When I got to my room, I was more tired than I'd realized. It seemed like I always was these days. I lay down on top of the sheets and hadn't even gotten my shoes off before I fell asleep. Four hours later I was awakened by Ostin.

"Hey, we're burning daylight. Let's go do something."

I sat up, rubbing my eyes. McKenna was in our room, standing slightly behind Ostin.

"McKenna wants to walk over to the university," Ostin said. "Then get some pizza."

"Where's Taylor?" I asked.

"She's still getting ready," McKenna said. "She just got out of the shower. She'll be here in a minute."

"Is anyone else coming?" I asked.

"I don't know," Ostin said. "Jack left with Abi about an hour ago."

"What about Nichelle?"

"I haven't seen her," McKenna said. "She's probably just in her room."

"Ask her if she wants to come with us," I said.

"Okay," she said. "I'll be right back." She walked out of the room.

While McKenna was checking on Nichelle, I called Gervaso's room. He answered immediately.

"Gervaso."

"Hi, it's Michael. We're walking over to the university."

"Who's we?"

"Me, Taylor, Ostin, and McKenna. Maybe Nichelle."

"All right. Just report by twenty hundred hours."

"When?"

"Eight p.m.," he said.

"Sure," I replied.

A few minutes later Taylor came up to my room, followed by McKenna and Nichelle. The University of Arizona was less than a mile from our hotel. The weather was scorching, with a dry breeze and a few puffy clouds in the sun-bleached sky.

In the center of the campus was a large, grass mall lined with tall palm trees on both sides. There were students everywhere, and it felt good to be out in the open without worrying that someone might be watching us.

Taylor took my hand. "Wouldn't it be nice to actually be here, going to school, our biggest worry in the world our next midterm?"

I nodded. "Unless you're Ostin. Midterms are like Christmas morning."

"Christmas?" he said. "No, that would be finals."

I squeezed Taylor's hand. "Yes, it would be nice."

As we walked toward the union building, we passed two hipsters with hair even longer than mine. One had muttonchop sideburns and a beret, and both of them had multiple tattoos. They were both a few years older than me. They were staring at me *and* Nichelle. One of them was sitting on the concrete rim of a trash receptacle, and the other was leaning against it. As we neared them, the guy sitting on the garbage said to me, "Hey, lightning dude."

I looked at him. "What did you call me?"

He raised his hands as if in surrender. "No worries, bro. I called you 'lightning dude.'" He pointed at my arms. "In reference to your awesome tat."

"Yeah," his friend said. "*Killer* tat. And yours," he said, turning to Nichelle.

"They mean our 'tattoos,'" Nichelle said.

"Yeah, I got that," I said.

"Where'd you get inked?" the second guy asked.

I hesitated. "Mexico."

"Agua Prieta?"

I had no idea what he was saying. "What?"

"Yeah," Ostin said. "Agua Prieta."

"Lucky's Tattoos," the first said. "Lucky did this one." He pulled his sleeve up over his upper arm, revealing two Chinese characters. "Cool, right? But he never showed me that design you're styling. I've been thinking of getting a sleeve like that. Next time I'm gonna have to get me one of those."

"Yeah, do that," I said.

"You guys want . . ." The guy stopped midsentence. He looked at his buddy. "What were you saying?"

"What were *you* saying?"

"I wasn't saying anything."

"What are you talking about, dude?"

"Bye," Taylor said.

As we walked away, I said to Taylor, "Did you do that?"

"Yeah. I couldn't stand it anymore."

Ostin started laughing.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"That tattoo that dude showed us."

"What's so funny about that?" Nichelle asked.

"The Chinese characters said 'pig face.'"

After walking the campus for a while, we stopped at a pizzeria named Magpies that was obviously very popular with students, as the line for a table was nearly to the door. It took us a half hour before we finally sat down and ordered our pizza.

Lined up across the front counter were a couple dozen bottles of assorted hot sauces.

"Look at these hot sauces," Taylor said. "Toxic Tick."

"I should get that," I said. "I tic."

"I think it's the bug tick, not the Tourette's tic," Ostin said.

"Look at this," McKenna said. "It's just called Hell."

"Wait, this one's Hotter Than Hell," Nichelle said.

"I just beat you all," Taylor said, holding up a bottle. "Scorned Woman." She looked at me. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

"You win," I said.

"No," Ostin said. "McKenna wins. She's hotter than all of them. Literally. And figuratively."

Taylor and I looked at each other.

"Did Ostin really just say that?" she whispered.

I nodded. "He did."

"Well played," she said. "Surprisingly well played."

Fifteen minutes later our waitress brought out our meal—two medium pizzas, one cheese and sausage, the other, the Whole Bird, was loaded with about everything on the menu. We also got an order of garlic bread and a large tossed salad with ranch dressing.

* * *

It was late, almost eight o'clock when we finally all met back at the hotel. Jack and Abigail were alone swimming in the hotel pool, and they waved us over.

"Hey, guys. Where have you been?" Abigail asked.

"We walked over to campus, hung out," Ostin said, trying to sound cool.

"How was it?" she asked.

"We had some good pizza," Taylor said.

"You can always find good pizza near a college," Abigail said.

"Yo, Michael," Jack said. "Gervaso said to call him when you got here. There's a phone in the lobby."

"What room is he in again?"

"My room—211."

I walked across the parking lot to the front office and called. Gervaso answered after just one ring. "Hello."

"It's Michael. We're back."

"All of you?"

"Yeah."

"Where are you?"

"We're by the pool with Jack and Abi."

"I'll be right down."

A few seconds later Gervaso came down the outside stairs and crossed the parking lot to the pool. He looked around to make sure we were alone, then said, "I've heard from the voice. The Elgen are on the move. They're about to launch their attack on Tuvalu."

I shook my head. We had almost died trying to stop them. For nothing.

"Can't we warn the people there?" Taylor asked.

Gervaso shook his head angrily. "We've already warned them. You risked your lives by sinking the *Ampere* and bought them the time they needed to react. They chose to disregard the threat, so now they'll have to suffer the consequences."

"There must be something we can do," Taylor said.

"We've sent messages to the CIA, Britain's MI6, and the United Nations. Beyond that, our hands are tied."

"So now what?" I asked.

"The voice wants us to rendezvous at our secondary headquarters. Christmas Ranch."

Taylor cocked her head. "Where's Christmas Ranch?"

"It's in southern Utah near Zion National Park," Gervaso said. "That's where everyone's gathered. Ian, Zeus, and Tessa arrived there this afternoon."

I was glad to hear they were safe. "How long will it take to get there?"

"Las Vegas is about six hours from here. From Vegas it's about a two-and-a-half-hour drive north."

"I've always wanted to see Las Vegas," Abigail said.

"I've seen it," Nichelle said. "That's where I got my nose and ear pierced. The first time."

"We're not going to have time to play," Gervaso said. "We're just driving through. If we leave early and don't make too many stops, we should reach the ranch by early afternoon."

"What time do we need to leave?" I asked.

"We should leave here by six thirty. We'll stop in Phoenix for breakfast. Everyone good with that?"

"We're good," I said.

"All right. Get some sleep. You all look like you're sleep deprived."

"Yeah, I wonder why," Jack said.

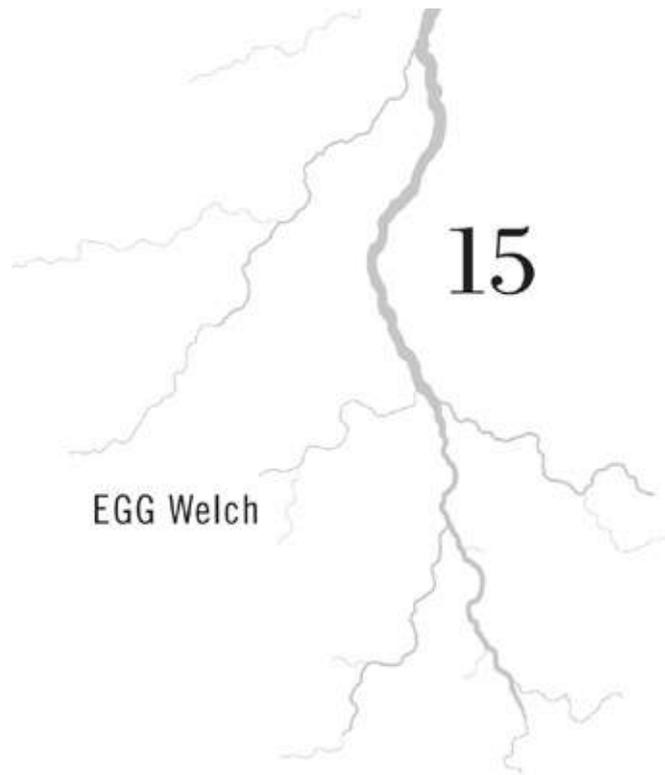
Gervaso walked back up to his room. After he was gone, I asked Taylor, "Do you want to swim?"

"No," she said. "I don't have anything to swim in."

Neither did I for that matter. I turned back to Jack and Abigail.
“Where did you guys get your swimsuits?”
“The hotel lost and found,” Abigail said. “They let me take one.”
“That’s resourceful,” Nichelle said. “Kind of gross, but resourceful.”
“What about you?” I asked Jack.
“I’m just wearing my boxers.”
“You’re in your underwear?” Taylor asked.
Jack smiled. “It’s all cloth, man.”
“All right,” I said. “Good night. See you bright and early.”
We went back to our rooms and slept.



PART FIVE



Lido Deck of the ES *Faraday* Kaohsiung Port, Taiwan

“You’re killing me,” Tara said.

“No I’m not,” Quentin said, looking over the chessboard between them. He had already captured more than half of Tara’s pieces. “I’m just slowly torturing you.”

For the last half hour they had been playing chess in the game room of the *Faraday*’s Lido Deck. The remaining three of Hatch’s Glows were also in the room. Kylee was reading a Hollywood gossip magazine, Torstyn was practicing throwing some Chinese stars he had just purchased at a night market in Kaohsiung, and Bryan, as usual, was playing a video game.

They had been back on the ship for only a few hours after spending the day cruising the malls in Kaohsiung. Admiral-General Hatch had informed them that later that night they were setting sail to Tuvalu and it would be a while before they saw civilization or any of its comforts. They did their best to stock up.

Tara groaned as Quentin took her second rook. “This is hopeless. I always lose.”

"Life is a game of chess," Quentin said. "The pieces are always in motion. If you don't plan three to five moves ahead, you lose to the one who does."

"That's profound," Torstyn said.

"Dr. Hatch taught me that. Did you know that there are more than a trillion possible play options in the first ten moves of chess?"

"No wonder I suck," Tara said. "I can barely handle one move at a time."

"You should make yourself look like Bobby Fischer," Quentin said. "At least you'll look like you know what you're doing."

"Who's Bobby Fischer?" she asked.

"Don't worry about it," he said.

"I don't get why we had to be on the boat so early," Bryan said. "We don't leave until ten."

"It's wartime procedures. They can't be holding up an invasion because Kylee couldn't decide what color nail polish she wants on her toes."

"Thanks for making me the failure in your story," Kylee said.

"If the shoe fits," Bryan said.

"My shoe will fit up your butt," Kylee said. She set down her magazine. "I wish we didn't have to travel in this piece of crap. I miss the *Ampere*. If Vey were here, I'd slap him. Twice."

"If Vey were here, I'd *kill* him," Torstyn said.

"Good luck with that," Bryan said.

"Dr. Hatch told me that our new yacht is almost complete," Quentin said. "Then we'll finally be able to move out of this pigsty."

"They can build boats that fast?" Torstyn asked.

"No, fortunately, Schema had ordered it three years ago. Probably the only smart thing he's ever done."

"What's it going to be called?" Kylee asked.

"The *Westinghouse*," Quentin said.

Tara said, "I heard it's even nicer than the *Ampere*."

"Nicer. Faster. Stronger," Quentin said. "It has two heliports, double the surface-to-air missiles, a surround sound theater. It even has a climbing wall and skateboard park."

"And it's not sitting at the bottom of the ocean," Bryan said without looking up from his video game. "That's a plus."

"I wish you were sitting at the bottom of the ocean," Kylee said.

"Is that where Dr. Hatch went?" Tara asked. "To pick it up?"

Quentin was still studying the board as he shook his head. "No. He flew to Jakarta to pick up a different boat. It's our new warship, the *Edison*. He'll meet us in Tuvalu." Quentin eyed Bryan severely. "Keep that to yourself; that's confidential information."

"Why did you only say that to me?" Bryan asked, raising his palms. "Besides, who would I tell? It's not like I know anyone besides you guys anyway."

"Don't tell *anyone*," Quentin said. "We don't need Vey and his terrorists blowing up another of our boats. He's taken out enough of them."

"Ha!" Tara laughed. "I just took your horse-guy."

"It's called a knight," Quentin said, moving his bishop. "And I just took your queen."

Tara groaned. "Why do I even play this with you?" Suddenly she turned into the president of the United States. "Because it's the prudent thing to do," she said in the president's voice.

Quentin grinned. "That's so cool."

"Hey, Tara, why don't you turn into Scarlett Johansson and we'll go out on a date?"

"Hey, Bryan," Tara said, "why don't I throw up in my mouth?"

"Idiot," Bryan said.

Torstyn laughed. "You had that coming, dude."

Bryan went back to his video game. A minute later he said, "Any of you hear about Welch?"

"EGG Welch," Quentin said, without looking up. "Show some respect. And what about him?"

As Hatch had turned over more responsibility to him, Quentin had become more concerned with protocol and order. But this was more than a formality. EGG Welch was one of Quentin's best friends. During Quentin's early years at the academy, Welch had taught him to golf and ski and oftentimes took him hunting on weekends. Welch was the closest thing Quentin had to a father.

"Well, the *egg* is scrambled now," Bryan said, grinning.

"What are you talking about?" Quentin said, looking up from the chessboard.

"Dr. Hatch sent him to the brig. When we reach Tuvalu, he's going to be rat feed."

Quentin suddenly looked panicked. "Who told you that?"

"Everyone's talking about it."

"Did you hear that?" Quentin asked Torstyn.

“No.”

“I heard it,” Tara said. “So did Kylee.”

“He’s down in the brig,” Kylee said. “I passed the guards escorting him.”

For a moment Quentin was speechless. “Do you know why Dr. Hatch had him arrested?”

“I heard it was because of Vey’s escape,” Tara said. “And the Chinese girl.”

“Glad it’s not me,” Bryan said.

Quentin looked even more upset. “Did it occur to any of you geniuses that Jade Dragon was *our* responsibility and that we might be next?”

Everyone stopped what they were doing.

“Dr. Hatch wouldn’t do that,” Kylee said, though the way she said it sounded more like a question than a statement.

“Why didn’t someone tell me about Welch?” Quentin asked angrily.

“I just did,” Bryan said.

“I’m sorry,” Tara said. “I thought you already knew. You know everything.”

“Apparently not,” Quentin said, standing. “I’m going to my room.” He stormed out.

“You idiot,” Tara said to Bryan.

“Why am I an idiot?” Bryan said. “He said he wanted to know.”

Torstyn stood up and walked out after Quentin, followed by Tara. Kylee just looked at Bryan and shook her head. “Nicely done, moron.”

“Shut up,” he said.

A few minutes later Tara and Torstyn knocked on Quentin’s door. “Q, it’s me and Torstyn. Can we come in?”

“It’s unlocked,” Quentin said.

They stepped inside. Quentin was lying on his bed, looking up at the ceiling.

“What are you thinking?” Tara asked.

Quentin hesitated. He had often suspected that his room was bugged, and now, just to be safe, he pulsed hard before speaking. “I’m thinking Dr. Hatch might be planning on punishing us, too.”

“Won’t be the first time,” Torstyn said.

“I mean mortally,” Quentin said. “He might feed one of us to the rats. Just to send a message that no one’s immune.”

Torstyn blanched. “Let them try. I’ll microwave them like popcorn.”

“You don’t think they’ll be expecting that?” Quentin said. “They’ll attack without warning. They’ll shoot us with darts, put RESATs on us to drain our power, and drag us away.”

“All of us?”

“No. Just one of us. To make an example. It’s how Hatch works.” He breathed out. “It’s probably me. I’m the leader.”

Torstyn looked at Tara, then back at Quentin. “Won’t happen, bro. If he comes after you, we’ll rescue you.”

Quentin nodded. “Thanks. That’s the way it’s got to be. For all of us.”

“Except Bryan,” Tara said.

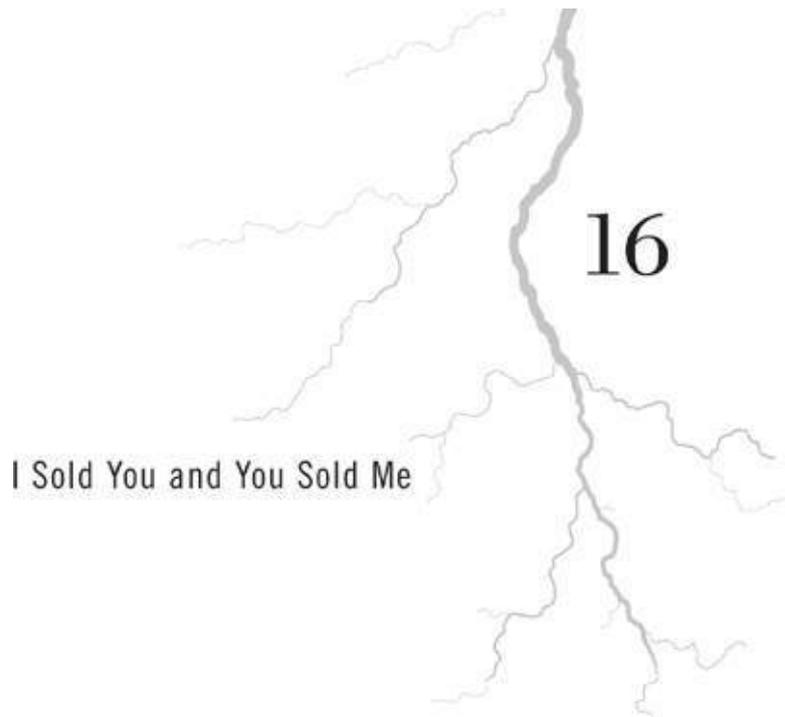
Quentin shook his head. “Even Bryan. If they can take any of us, they can take all of us.”

“What about Welch?” Torstyn asked.

“I’m not going to let it happen to him, either. I need to talk to him.”

“That’s impossible,” Tara said. “He’s in the brig. You know no one’s allowed down there except Dr. Hatch.”

Quentin looked at Tara. “Then Dr. Hatch will need to visit him.”



The two Elgen guards stationed outside the brig's entrance stood at attention as Quentin, Torstyn, and Tara approached.

"Admiral-General, sir," they said in unison, sharply saluting. The guards didn't know it was Quentin they were saluting, as Tara was using her powers to make him appear as Hatch.

"Open the door," Quentin said.

"Yes, Admiral-General," the first guard said. He ran an electric key over the pad and the lock clicked. The other guard opened the door.

"Do not let me be disturbed," Quentin said. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Admiral-General."

"These are sensitive matters. Level C10. I want complete privacy. If I am disturbed, there will be consequences. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Admiral-General."

Quentin and Tara stepped in through the door, leaving Torstyn alone with the guards in the hallway. Tara pulled the door shut behind them. Before coming down to the cell, Quentin and Tara had gone up to the ship's bridge and taken out the brig cameras. Still, Quentin glanced up to the cameras again just to be sure they were dead. Then he looked at Welch sitting on the floor of the small cell. He had been there for less than twenty-four hours, yet he already looked haggard and defeated.

"Stand up!" Quentin shouted at Welch.

Welch quickly climbed to his feet. Like the guards outside the brig, he also believed Quentin was Dr. Hatch. "Jim," Welch said. "Can we talk about this?"

"Don't ever speak that name," Quentin said. "Jim Hatch no longer exists."

Welch lowered his head. "My apologies, Admiral-General," he said weakly. "Please don't do this."

"Quit sniveling," Quentin said. "It's unbecoming of an Elgen guard, especially an EGG."

"Yes, sir. I thought you had already left for Jakarta."

"My plans have temporarily changed," Quentin said, taking a few steps closer, his eyes locked on the prisoner. "Because of you."

Welch just stared at him.

"I'm in a quandary, Welch. A quandary. You were my first. My most trusted. You have been with me since the beginning."

"Yes, sir."

"Which is why you understand better than anyone else why mercy is not an acceptable strategy. To show mercy is to allow weakness. And to allow weakness is to promote more weakness. As soon as people think I'm getting soft, they'll start testing the waters. Then the trust of my army is like water in my hands." He took a deep breath. "But still . . . there might be a way around this."

"Sir?" Welch said.

"Don't get too excited," Quentin said. "It involves a choice on your part. Perhaps a difficult one."

"Please, sir. Whatever you ask."

"You were in charge of Operation Jade Dragon. But you were not alone in this assignment. You and the electric youths were in charge. And Quentin is in charge of the youths. For reasons I've already explained, I can't let this failure go without punishment. But the one I punish doesn't necessarily need to be you. So I came to ask you, EGG Welch. Should I feed Quentin to the rats instead of you?"

Welch stared at him. "I don't understand."

"This is not a difficult question," Quentin said. "It's you or Quentin."

Welch didn't answer.

Quentin continued. "On the way to your cell this evening, I realized that, in this circumstance, life is imitating art. You are familiar with George Orwell's book *1984*?"

"Of course, sir."

“Then you must see the irony of what is happening here. In the book we have Winston in room 101 facing his greatest fear—his primal fear of rats. Do you remember what he does to save himself?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what is that?”

Welch swallowed. “He betrays his love, Julia.”

“Exactly,” Quentin said. “‘Do it to Julia,’ he says. ‘Do it to Julia.’ Now here you are facing a nearly identical fate. The rat bowl. You and Quentin have always been close, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Quentin moved closer to the bars. “So what is it, Welch? Who should I feed to the rats? You or Quentin?”

Welch gritted his teeth as he stared at the man he thought was Hatch, then he said forcefully, “It’s my fault. I’m the only one to blame.”

Quentin stared at him in disbelief. A weak, frightened part of him had hoped that Welch would betray him, as it would make his path easier, as crooked as that path might be. But deep down inside, in a part of his heart that had been kept shrouded for too long, he wanted his friend and mentor to be true. Welch was. Now the burden of action was back on his own shoulders. Quentin looked at him for a moment, then said softly, “‘Under the spreading chestnut tree, I sold you and you sold me . . .’” He looked back at Tara. “You can stop.”

Tara released her power, and Quentin suddenly appeared to Welch as who he was. “You didn’t betray me,” Quentin said softly.

Welch looked at him in disbelief. “Quentin?”

“I came as soon as I found out.”

Welch didn’t speak for a moment, then he said, “Thank you. But I’m afraid that there’s nothing that can be done. It’s dangerous for you to even be here.”

“There’s always something that can be done,” Quentin replied.

Welch looked up at the camera. “You need to go. You’ve already taken too great a risk. . . .”

“They can’t see us,” Tara said, furtively glancing at the dark security camera. “We took out the cameras before coming down.”

“We’re safe,” Quentin said. “For a few more minutes. Tell me what you know about what Hatch plans to do to you and when.”

“He plans to keep me locked up until we reach Tuvalu, then, after the revolution, send me to the bowl.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Quentin said. “I won’t let it.”

“He won’t change his mind,” Welch said.

“Then we’ll help you escape.”

“You can’t do that. He’ll punish you instead.”

“Then we’ll come with you,” Quentin said.

“It’s no use. They’ll find you. You’ve been implanted with tracking devices.”

Tara looked at Quentin. Quentin had suspected as much, but it was frightening to hear it was true.

“We have tracking devices inside us?” Tara asked.

“You were implanted years ago,” Welch said. “When they gave you your immunizations. They’ll track you down in a matter of hours.”

“Then we’ll have to fight him,” Quentin said.

“Fight Dr. Hatch?” Tara repeated as if Quentin had just blasphemed.

“Yes,” Quentin said. “He’s always talking about the extermination of the nonelectrics, but he’s a Nonel. He’s not one of us.”

“I can’t believe we’re talking about this,” Tara said.

“We knew it had to come to this someday,” Quentin said. “We always knew.”

“So did Hatch,” Welch said. “He’s always been paranoid, but he’s especially afraid of you kids. He’s like a man who has raised baby tigers knowing that they could turn on him when they grew up. He’s talked to the EGGs for years about what would happen if any of you turned against him. He’s prepared.”

Quentin frowned. “Hopefully he won’t be prepared for all of us.” He looked into Welch’s eyes. “What do you think we should do?”

Welch was quiet for a moment; then, in a rare show of emotion, his eyes welled up. “You should go back to your rooms before anyone finds out you’ve been here.”

“But what about you?” Quentin asked.

“I knew the risks when I joined Hatch.”

“That’s not an option,” Quentin said. “I refuse to accept that.”

“As powerful as you are, you can’t beat him,” Welch said. “Even if I somehow escaped, the Elgen would hunt me down until they found me. They have the men, the money, and the power.”

“Michael Vey has beaten Hatch,” Quentin said. “Three times. I’m just as smart as he is. And Hatch doesn’t know that we’re not on his side. That gives us an advantage.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Welch said. “Hatch knows that you and I are close. He’s going to be watching how you deal with this.”

“He must not be too suspicious,” Tara said. “Or else he would have taken us with him. Or at least Quentin.”

They were all quiet for a while; then finally Welch sighed. “No. No matter how you look at it, it’s too big a risk. You need to get out of here.”

Quentin shook his head. “It’s already too late for that. The guards saw Hatch come in. They’ll report that visit. Their superiors know that Hatch is gone. It won’t take an Elgen scientist to figure out what really happened.”

Tara turned white with fear. “You didn’t tell me. . . .” She began to tremble. “He’ll feed me to the rats.” She grabbed Quentin’s arms. “He’ll feed all of us to the rats.”

“No one’s getting fed to the rats,” Quentin said calmly. “At least not any of us.” He turned back to Welch. “I need your help. You know Elgen protocol. What do we do to get you off the ship?”

Welch looked at him for a moment, then finally relented. “We need to get rid of the guards before they file their shift report.”

“How do we do that?”

Welch thought about it for a moment, then said, “It might be easier than we think.” He turned to Tara. “We’ll just have Hatch give them a different order.”

“To do what?” Tara asked.

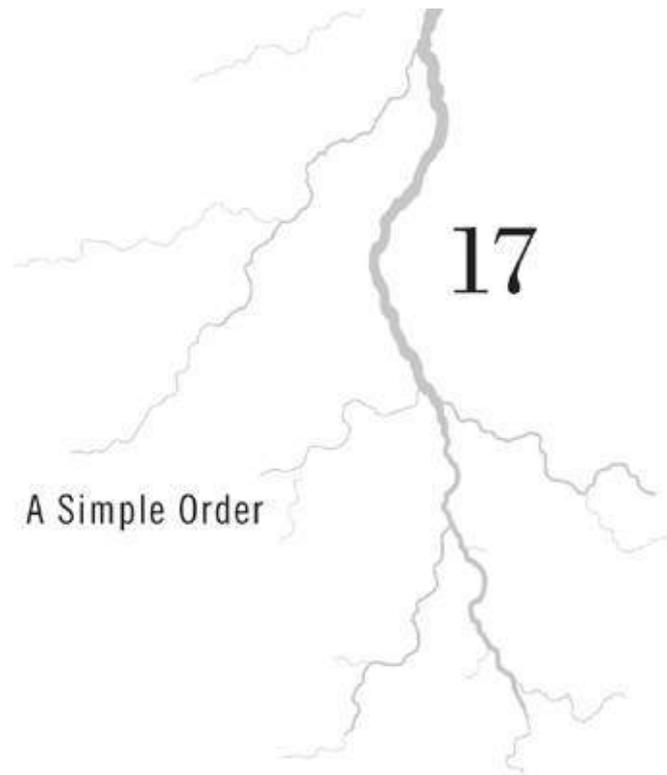
“Have them transfer a Taiwanese prisoner off the ship.” He looked at Tara. “You can make me Taiwanese?”

“I can make you a dolphin,” she said.

“Taiwanese will do. Can you change more than one person at a time?”

“No. It takes too much focus. It would be like playing two different songs on the piano at the same time.”

“All right. We’ll just have to think around this.” He looked down for a moment, then back up. “Okay, I know what we need to do.”



The guards stood at attention as Quentin, still disguised as Hatch, walked out of the brig. Quentin nodded to Torstyn, then turned to the guards. “I have spoken with the Taiwanese government. They are ready to take Mr. Yin into custody. We will oblige them.”

The guards glanced at each other. “Who, sir?” the first guard asked.

“Don’t you even know who you’re guarding?” Hatch bellowed. “Didn’t you check your prison log?”

“My apologies, sir. I must have missed the name.”

“Indeed. Tara will finish interrogating Mr. Yin; then you will escort him, unfettered, off this boat to the Taiwanese officials. They will be waiting for you on An Ping Road. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” the guards said simultaneously.

“An Ping Road. Do you think you can handle this?”

“Yes, sir. No problem, sir.”

“I don’t want to be bothered any more concerning this matter. I’m angry enough that we have to return this criminal. I’m going back to the bridge.”

“What about EGG Welch?” the senior guard asked.

Quentin spun around. “What did you say?”

The guard cowered. “. . . EGG Welch. I was just wondering, who will . . .”

“Citizen Welch is no longer an EGG, and he will not be called one. The penalty for using that term for him is imprisonment. Do you understand me!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, I gave you a simple order. If my orders are too difficult for you to follow, then perhaps your rank should be changed to something a little more basic, like GP.”

Both men shuddered. “No, sir. We’ll see that everything is done as requested.”

Quentin looked back and forth between them. “We’ll see. Tara will call for you when she is ready. This prisoner exchange is an embarrassment to me. I want you to take Mr. Yin out the back of the boat and avoid all guards. You must hurry; we are about to set sail. If you are asked what you are doing, you will tell them you are following specific orders from higher up. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

Quentin turned to Torstyn. “Torstyn, you and Tara will escort these men until they are off the *Faraday*; then you will report to me. You have ninety minutes before we set sail.”

“Yes, sir,” Torstyn said.

Quentin turned and walked away.

The guards looked at each other fearfully. Less than a minute later Tara called over the intercom, “We’re ready. Open the door.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the senior guard said, unlocking the brig. The door opened, and Tara walked out ahead of a Taiwanese man. “Mr. Yin is ready to be escorted to the Taiwanese officials,” Tara said.

“Yes, ma’am. Admiral-General Hatch has given us our orders.” They stepped to either side of their prisoner. “Let’s go.”

Torstyn fell in behind them.

Welch, of course, didn’t speak. As they walked him out of the brig, one of the guards stopped at a kiosk.

“What are you doing?” Tara asked.

“We’re checking him out. It’s required procedure.”

Just then Quentin walked back, as himself, down the hallway. He pulsed, killing the kiosk. “Did Admiral-General Hatch tell you to follow procedure, or did he tell you to avoid further embarrassment?”

The guards looked up at him. They were speechless.

"I just spoke with the admiral-general. He was not happy, and he was very specific with his orders." Quentin lifted his cell phone. "Shall I notify him that you think you know better?"

"No, sir," said the second guard. "We'll escort the prisoner immediately off the boat."

"I would recommend that. The Admiral-General mentioned something to me about a rank change."

"There's no need to threaten us, sir," the first guard said. "We will follow orders."

The two guards took Welch by the arms and hurried him down the corridor, while Tara, Quentin, and Torstyn followed from a distance. The guards led Welch to the second floor, where the staff was completing the loading of food. When the group reached the loading ramp, Quentin said, "Give me your weapons. You won't need them." The men disarmed. To the guards' surprise, Quentin handed one of the pistols to Welch.

"Be quick," Quentin said to the guards. "The Taiwanese officials will meet you on An Ping Road near the front of the mall. That's two miles due east. I recommend you take a cab."

"Yes, sir."

They hurried off. "How far can you hold the illusion?" Quentin asked Tara.

"I'm not sure. No more than a few blocks."

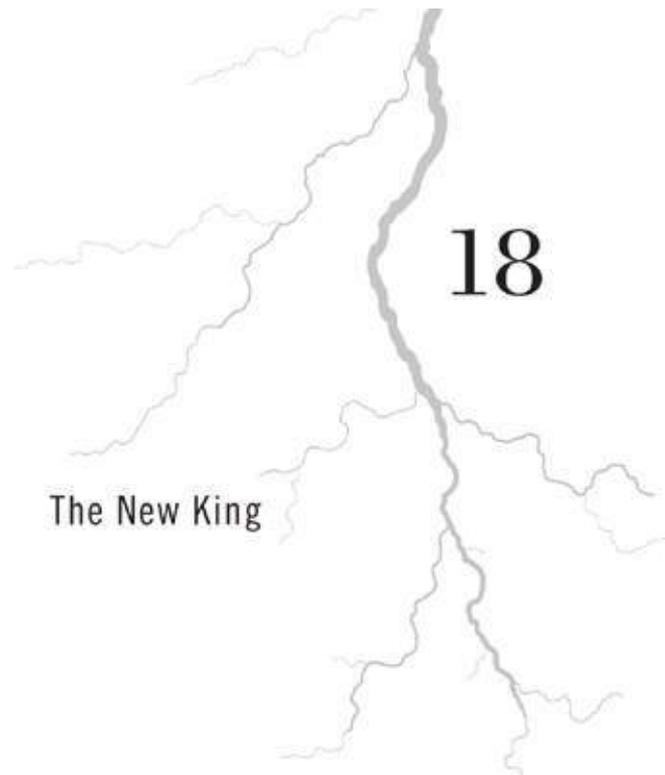
"Won't they be surprised?"

"What if they try to return him?"

"They won't. Welch is armed; they're not. And they just broke three Elgen protocols and are now guilty of aiding an Elgen fugitive. Discipline will be execution. I guarantee we won't ever see either of them again. At least not alive."

"What about EGG Welch?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know." He turned back. "Let's get back to our room before anyone discovers that the prisoner's missing."



The *Faraday* set sail from Kaohsiung that evening a little after ten o'clock. The captain of the ship, Captain Bradshaw, set a course southeast to Tuvalu, through the Philippine Sea, and docked four days later in Papua New Guinea to join up with the other Elgen ships.

Three days later the two new Elgen ships, the *Franklin* and the *Edison*, arrived, completing the fleet. It would take just thirty-six more hours to reach Tuvalu.

The night before their final voyage to Tuvalu, Quentin was lying on his bed reading a book when someone rapped on his door. "Come in," he shouted.

Tara walked into his room. "Hey, Q."

"Hey," he said, looking up. "Where you been?"

"Just hanging out on top with Kylee. What are you reading?"

Quentin held up his book.

"*The Once and Future King*," Tara said, nodding. "Good book. Though, I disagree with the premise. *Might is right*."

Quentin looked at her quizzically. "So what's up? You look upset."

"Dr. Hatch is back."

Quentin was quiet a moment, then said, "Good. I heard he might be coming back tonight."

“He’s already back on the ship. EGG Smythe said he wants to meet with you ASAP.”

Quentin’s brow furrowed. “Meet with me about what?”

“I’m not supposed to know this, but he said Welch’s escape. I’m sure he wants to know if we had any involvement in it.”

Quentin didn’t flinch. “Why would he wonder that?”

“Why wouldn’t he? Who else could have gotten him off the ship?”

“The guards helped him off.”

Tara looked at him quizzically. “But what if he thinks you were involved? Welch was like a father to you.”

“He *was* like a father,” Quentin said. “But now he’s a deserter and a traitor. No Elgen leaves their post without Admiral-General Hatch’s permission. No one. Not even us. Friend or not, Welch knew the consequences when he made his decision. And anyone who helped Welch is a traitor and deserves the same punishment.” Quentin went back to his book. “Don’t worry. Dr. Hatch will find him. He’ll find all of them. And we’ll see them in the rat bowl.”

“I’m so relieved to hear you say that,” Tara said. She suddenly turned back toward the door. “All right. Let it go.”

Quentin looked back up as Tara transformed into Dr. Hatch.

“I’m not Tara,” Hatch said. “I’m sorry for the ruse. I just needed to be sure.”

“Dr. Hatch,” Quentin said, setting down his book and sitting up. He still looked puzzled. “Sure of what?”

“That you weren’t involved in Welch’s escape.”

“You thought I would betray you?”

“I knew how close you were to Welch. I wanted to make sure your friendship hadn’t clouded your judgment. Especially on the eve of battle.”

“I know where I stand, sir.”

“So you do.” Hatch walked over to Quentin’s wall and read a quote.

Mankind will only perish through eternal peace.

—Adolf Hitler

He smiled as he turned back. “So, matters at hand. The overthrow of Tuvalu will happen quickly. The Tuvalu defense, if you can call it that, will offer about as much resistance as a tree does to lightning. We will strike them hard and splinter them into shavings.”

“How can I help, sir?”

"I want you to accompany the first squadron's landing on Funafuti. It is your mission to take out all possible communication devices in the area. Captain Steele has the coordinates; he and his men will lead the advance and protect you and the other youths."

"Yes, sir."

"You will take control of the Tuvalu radio station before they can broadcast an emergency message to the world. We are jamming frequencies from the plant, but there is still danger of word getting out. Take out their computers, but do not do too much damage to their broadcasting equipment. We will need to use the radio to broadcast the next morning."

"Yes, sir. I'll focus on tech wiring."

"Very good. By dawn our forces will have secured all communication and all weaponry, and crushed all rebellion, if there is any. Their tiny police force will be locked up in their own jails."

"You mentioned the other youths."

"Actually, just Bryan will be traveling with you. In the event that the radio operators try to lock you out, Bryan will cut through the locks."

"Yes, sir. What about Torstyn?"

"He and Tara will assist me inside the Starxource facility. We'll be flying out in the morning. Kylee will serve with the fourth division. Her gifts will be valuable in disarming their police force. Once you have taken the station, Captain Steele will cordon off the facility. I want you and Bryan to maintain possession of the station until I arrive in the morning for the first broadcast."

"Yes, sir."

"There's another reason I want you at the radio station."

"What is that, sir?"

"I want to introduce the citizens of the Hatch Islands to their new king."

"You, sir?"

"No, *you*."

Quentin looked at him in surprise. "Me?"

"This is what I've been grooming you for since the beginning. Someday you will rule the world in my stead. I want you to begin your apprenticeship by overseeing this island nation. You will be the king of Tuvalu."

For a moment Quentin was speechless. "I don't know what to say. Thank you, sir."

“I’m pleased that I can count on you. You have no idea how pleased I am that you had nothing to do with this Welch business.”

“Me too, sir. So, what do we know about Welch and the guards?”

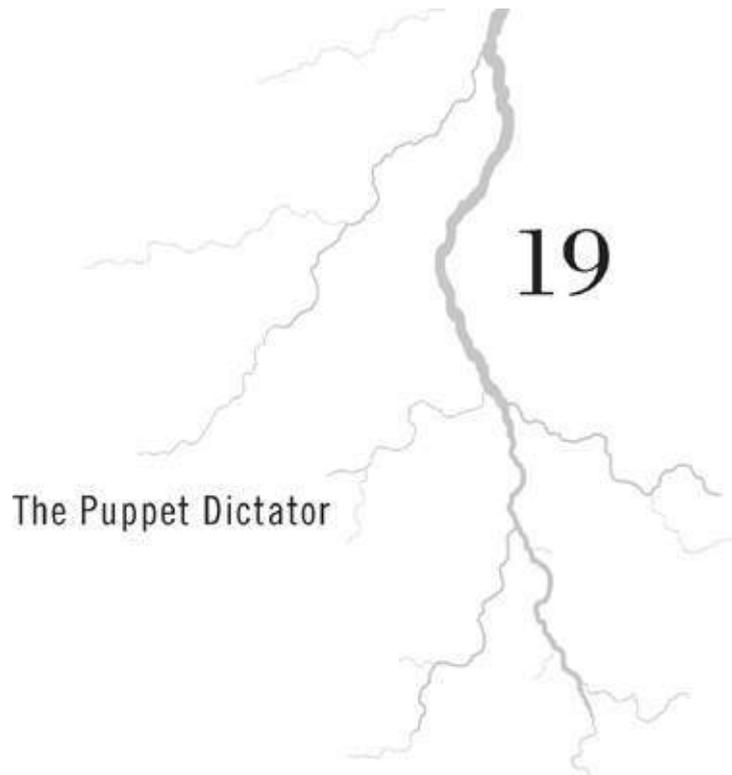
“We’re tracking their RFIDs right now. We’ve already found one of the guards.”

Quentin hid his fear. “You have?”

“At least his body. It would appear that his companions turned on him.”

“It’s just a matter of time before we find the others, sir.”

“Yes, it is. And you have my word, Welch will have company in the rat bowl.”



Around one in the morning Tara snuck into Quentin's room. Quentin had been asleep for more than an hour. "Quentin." She knelt next to his bed and shook him. "Q."

Quentin's eyes opened. He jumped when he saw the shadow next to him. "It's just me. Tara."

"Tara," Quentin said, rubbing his eyes.

"How did it go with Dr. Hatch?"

Quentin just stared at her.

"Did it go all right?"

He hesitated a moment more, then asked, "What were we doing when Torstyn told us about Welch?"

"What?"

"You heard me. What were we doing?"

"We were playing chess. And it was Bryan who told us, not Torstyn."

Quentin breathed out. "It is you." He rolled away from her. "Now get out of here. I have nothing to say to you."

"Quentin."

"Leave. Now."

"Look, I don't blame you for being mad. But he made me do it. I had no choice."

Quentin rolled back over. "That could have been my death."

"No, I did it for us. If I had refused, he would have known we were involved. That includes you. Did you say anything in, incrim . . ."

"Incriminating," Quentin said. "No. I knew it was Hatch."

Tara looked both relieved and surprised. "How did you know?"

"He quoted from *The Once and Future King*. The day you read a book, let alone quote from it, is the day I eat it."

"So basically my illiteracy saved you," she said, trying to soften Quentin's anger.

"Your illiteracy saved *us*," Quentin said. "You would have been on the rat chute right next to me."

Tara swallowed. "It's a good thing he didn't go to Torstyn. He's not as smart as you."

"Did you tell Torstyn?"

"Yes. I told him that if anyone, including us, says anything to him about it, he knows nothing."

"Good," Quentin said. "We need to come up with a sign so that never happens again. A handshake or something."

"Torstyn and I leave in the morning," Tara said. "We're flying to the island."

"Yeah, Hatch told me. Did he tell you that he's making me the king of Tuvalu?"

"No. Congratulations, I guess. How does that make you feel?"

"Elagabalus was only fifteen when he became Roman emperor, and Ptolemy XIII was only twelve when he became Egypt's thirteenth pharaoh."

"I've never heard of either of them."

"Ptolemy was Cleopatra's brother."

"I've heard of Cleopatra."

"Unfortunately, things didn't work out for either of them. Elagabalus was assassinated when he was eighteen. And Ptolemy's forces were defeated by Caesar, and he drowned in the Nile while trying to escape."

"Then let's hope you have better luck," Tara said.

"You know I'm just a puppet dictator," Quentin said. "Dr. Hatch will still be in charge."

"I know. For now. But someday you will run all of this. And I'll be there with you." She leaned forward and they kissed. "I am loyal to you," she said. "Don't forget that."

"Thank you. Now you better go back to bed."

Tara stood. "All right." At the doorway she breathed out slowly. "If something had happened to you, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself."

Quentin looked at her for a moment, then said, "Come back."

She walked back over and knelt down next to the bed. "Yes?"

"I understand that you did what you had to do. I forgive you."

"Thank you."

He clasped her hand in a peculiar handshake, the middle and index finger out, the other two pointed in, like a gun. "That's our handshake. That's how I'll know it's really you and vice versa. Can you remember that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Because our lives may depend on it."

She nodded and stood.

"One more thing," he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm loyal to you, too."

Tara smiled, then turned and walked out of his room.



PART SIX



Tucson, Arizona

We were on the move again. We left Tucson at six thirty, stopped a little after eight in Phoenix for breakfast, then continued on. Gervaso pushed the speed limit most of the way. He was eager to get us to the ranch. But, with the exception of Nichelle, who wanted to stop in Vegas to shop for some new clothes, we were all eager to get to the ranch too. We wanted to see our families and the rest of the Electroclan.

It seemed that the closer we got to the ranch, the more of a hurry Gervaso was in. A little past Kingman a highway patrol turned on its lights to pull us over, and Gervaso said to Taylor, "Can you take care of that?"

Taylor looked at the approaching police car nervously. "I'll try," she said. "I hope I don't make him crash."

"I can do it," Nichelle said. She looked back and extended her hand. Suddenly the flashing lights on the car's roof died, as did the whole car. We lost sight of the patrol car as it coasted over to the side of the road.

It was about a four-and-a-half-hour drive from Phoenix to Vegas. The drive from Las Vegas to southern Utah on I-15 led through the

Moapa Valley in the upper northwest corner of Nevada, briefly recrossing into Arizona. Just before crossing into southern Utah, we drove through a chiseled rock canyon that towered high above the pass. Ostin spotted mountain goats perched on the side of the mountainous crag.

“Look at those things,” Ostin said.

“That’s incredible,” McKenna replied. “I wouldn’t climb that mountain with a rope and climbing gear. Those things are walking on it with hooves.”

“I wonder how many mountain goats fall,” I said.

Everyone automatically turned to Ostin.

He shrugged. “Why would I know that?”

* * *

We drove through the borderline casino town of Mesquite before crossing over the Utah border. Then we continued on I-15 up to St. George, went about ten miles north, and turned off the highway, then headed east to the towns of Hurricane and Springdale, before entering Zion National Park. Our destination was just on the other side of the park, and the road through Zion was the shortest route. Peculiarly, something about the place seemed familiar. Like I’d been there before.

The place was crowded with tourists, and even though it was only twelve miles from the west gate to the east gate, it still took us about forty-five minutes to get across. Near the east end of the park our drive took us through a long, two-lane tunnel more than a mile long, carved through the mountain. The only lights in the tunnel were those from the headlamps of the cars in the opposite lane, so the whole way our van was brightly lit by our glows.

We passed through the east gate of the park and had continued on for about five miles when Gervaso slowed the van to turn north onto a dirt road. “This is the place,” he said.

Not surprisingly, the entrance to Christmas Ranch was not obvious nor well marked, and if it weren’t for a wood-post stop sign, you’d probably drive right past it. Just after turning off the freeway, Gervaso stopped the van and took a radio from beneath his seat. “This is Bauble Six, returning to tree.”

“Roger, Bauble Six. Your ETA?”

“Ten minutes. We just pulled onto the road.”

“We’ll alert sentries. Welcome home.”

Gervaso put the van in gear and started off again.

“Look at those,” Ostin said, pointing out the window.

Outside there were two drones, one on each side of the van, hovering about fifty feet in the air, escorting us.

The road to the ranch was rutted dirt lined with cedar trees, twisted juniper, and small clumps of cacti and prickly pear. A deep, dry ravine ran along the road for much of the way, indicating that there had, at least once, been a lot of water in these parts.

As we made our way toward the compound, we passed several herds of cows and sheep. To our surprise we also saw several llamas. I hadn’t seen a llama since Peru, and I felt an odd attachment to them.

“Lots of cows out here,” McKenna said.

“Did you know that more people are killed each year by cows than sharks?” Ostin said.

“The Discovery Channel should change Shark Week to Cow Week,” I said.

“Yeah, look at them out there,” Jack said, grinning. “Plotting their next kill. Wild pack of killer cows.”

“It’s not a pack,” Ostin said. “It’s a herd.”

“A what?”

“A *herd* of cows.”

“Of course I’ve heard of cows,” Jack said.

“No, a *herd*. A group of hoofed mammals that congregate together for—”

“Ostin,” I said, stopping him. “He’s just messing with you.”

Ostin looked at Jack and stopped. “Oh.”

“Killer cows,” Jack said, shaking his head. “At least cows won’t eat you. They don’t even have sharp teeth.”

“Neither do hippos,” Ostin said. “But that doesn’t stop them from killing more people than lions and crocodiles combined.”

“Don’t get him started on hippos,” Taylor said. “I’ve heard this.”

“Did you know hippos’ mother’s milk is pink?” Ostin said.

“I warned you,” Taylor said, shaking her head.

“I really didn’t want to know that,” Jack said.

“What’s with the llamas?” McKenna asked. “What are they doing here?”

“They’re guard llamas,” Ostin said. “Farmers use them to protect small sheep and chickens from coyotes and foxes. Llamas are aggressive animals and very territorial. Once they bond with a herd of animals, they get very upset when something comes near them.”

“What do they do, spit on them?” Taylor asked.

“Exactly,” Ostin said. “And scream at them.”

“Llamas scream?” she asked.

“Yeah. It sounds like an amplified rusty hinge,” Ostin said. “Or feedback on a microphone.”

“That’s just weird,” Taylor said.

“Not as weird as pink milk,” Nichelle said.

“I’d run from that,” McKenna said.

“The llama scream or the pink hippo milk?” Taylor asked.

“Both.”

“They’re also good at kicking,” Ostin continued. “They’ll chase a coyote away from the herd and kick it. Some of them will even try to herd the animals together in a group to protect them.”

“I didn’t realize llamas were so smart,” McKenna said.

“They are.”

“Maybe Ostin’s dad is part llama,” Jack said.

Ostin frowned.

“That was a compliment,” Jack said.

Ostin still didn’t smile.

After several winding bends, Gervaso slowed to a stop in front of a large timber archway, then turned off the dirt road down into a decline shrouded on both sides by towering cottonwood trees. The road was lined with a low barbwire fence held up by cedar posts. There was pasture on both sides of the road, with cows grazing beneath the shade of the cottonwoods.

“This is pretty,” Taylor said.

“Welcome to Christmas Ranch,” Gervaso said.

“It doesn’t look as threatening as the last place.”

“It doesn’t need to be,” Gervaso said. “We’re in the U.S. But don’t let it fool you. There are sentries and machine gun bunkers along the road, and missile launchers in silos. You just can’t see them.”

We drove past an orchard of apple trees next to a field of lavender. “It’s nice. I could live here,” Taylor said.

“For a long time,” Gervaso said. “Just like our compound in Mexico, Christmas Ranch is completely self-sufficient and off the grid. We grow our own food, pump our own water, raise our own beef, and generate our own electricity. We even have beehives.”

“I love fresh honeycomb,” Taylor said. “With cheese. Especially with cheese.”

“We make our own cheese as well,” Gervaso added. “From goats and sheep. We keep busy.”

“Do you have more llamas?” McKenna asked.

Gervaso smiled. “No. But we have around-the-clock snipers, so we don’t worry about coyotes.”

We stopped at a wooden gate that was reinforced with riveted steel plating. A man suddenly appeared. I have no idea where he came from. He wore a cowboy hat and boots. “Welcome back,” he said. “You got them all?”

“Every last one of them,” Gervaso said.

The man pushed a button, and the gate opened. “Go on ahead; everyone’s waiting.”

Gervaso drove ahead until the road curved left and turned to gravel, which crunched and spit out beneath our tires, pinging against the van’s undercarriage. We climbed an incline for about a hundred yards past a large open aluminum-topped carport that was filled to the top with bundles of hay.

Then the road split into three different directions: left, straight ahead, and right. We took the right fork up a road lined by white vinyl horse fencing and columnar poplar trees nearly sixty feet tall.

The road opened up into a clearing with a large house and about a half dozen parked vehicles, mostly Jeeps and Hummers. To the left of us was a horse stable and corral, and to the right was a large tarp over a tractor. On the hill below that was an amphitheater with a large outdoor movie screen.

“I think I could live here,” Taylor said again.

“It’s beautiful,” Gervaso said. “But it’s not so great in the winter. We get a lot of snow. Enough to snow us in.”

“I can do snow days,” Taylor said, looking at me. “As long as I have someone to keep me warm.”

Jack smiled at me and gave me a thumbs-up.

As we pulled up to the house, a group of people emerged from the front door onto the deck. Most of the people we’d seen before, but all I really cared about was seeing my mother and Ostin’s parents. We didn’t have to wait long.

Ostin’s mother looked beside herself with joy. My own mother was, as usual, looking calm and happy. She was standing next to Joel.

Gervaso stopped the van. “Welcome home, Electroclan.”

“Home sweet home,” Taylor said. “Wherever that is these days.”

“Home is where they don’t want to kill you,” Jack said.

We all climbed out. Not surprisingly, Ostin’s mother was the first to greet us. She threw her arms around Ostin and began kissing him. Ostin

was so glad to see her, he didn't even look embarrassed. She was followed by Mr. Liss, my mother, and Chairman Simon.

My mother wrapped her arms around me. She had tears in her eyes. "I'm so glad you're safe." After a moment she stepped back, examining my arms and neck. "What happened? What are those marks?"

I was going to get all technical and say something about Lichtenberg figures, but instead I just said, "I got too electric. It scarred me. It's on my chest and back, too."

She looked concerned as she ran a finger over the scars. "Does it hurt?"

"No."

She threw her arms around me again. "I'm glad you're safe. I've been so worried about you."

I stepped back. "You were worried about me? I thought you were dead."

"I know. I'm sorry. Things were crazy for a while. We got an advance warning that the Elgen were going to attack, and we had to evacuate in the middle of the night." She hugged me again. "I'm just glad you're safe."

After we parted, she looked over at Taylor. "Hello, Taylor."

"Hello, Mrs. Vey. We've been so worried about you all."

My mother hugged her as well. "Thank you for watching over Michael."

"I did my best."

"I knew you would."

My mother then went around and hugged everyone else, stopping at Nichelle, who was standing by herself near the back of the van. She had never seen any of these people before and I guessed felt like an outsider. "You must be Nichelle," my mom said.

Nichelle looked a little shy. "Yes, ma'am."

"Nichelle saved our bacon," I said.

My mother smiled. "Thanks for saving my son's bacon."

Nichelle grinned. "I was glad to save his bacon."

The chairman then stepped up and put out his hand to Nichelle. "Nichelle, I'm Chairman Simon. We've been following you for so long, I feel like I already know you. I'm so pleased to finally meet you."

"That's kind of creepy, but it's nice to meet you, too," she said awkwardly. "Are you the one who sent them to get me in California?"

"It was a decision made by the council, but it was my idea."

"Thank you for trusting me."

“Thank you for making me right.”

“It’s about time you guys got here,” someone shouted.

I turned to see Zeus walking up from around the side of the house. He was followed by Ian, Tanner, Grace, and Tessa. “What took you guys so long?”

We man hugged. “You guys ditch us and then complain we’re late?” I said.

“Ditched you? Man, it was intense. I thought we were under attack.”

“Yeah,” Ian said. “Zeus almost took out one of our own vans before I stopped him.”

“Fortunately no one was hurt,” Gervaso said.

A man I’d never seen before raised his bandaged arm. “What exactly do you mean by ‘hurt’?”

Gervaso grinned. “By ‘hurt’ I meant ‘killed.’”

“Then no one was hurt,” he said.

I hugged Ian and Tessa as well. “How’s the ranch?” I asked.

“I love it here,” Tessa said. “It’s awesome.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool,” Ian concurred.

Tanner walked up to me. He looked the best I’d seen him yet. He looked healthy. “Hey, Tanner,” I said, hugging him.

“Hey, Vey-dude. You’re still alive. I was sure you were going down on this one.”

“That’s comforting,” I said. “We almost did. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing all right,” he said. “This place is healing.”

“Healing’s good,” I said.

He nodded. “Yeah. Healing’s good.” He suddenly noticed Nichelle and his expression changed. “I can’t believe she’s here.”

“She’s cool,” I said.

He looked at me as if I were crazy. “Nichelle’s cool?” he said. “No, she ain’t. We have history.”

“Look,” I said. “Hatch has made all of us do things we’re not proud of. You can understand that.”

For a moment Tanner was speechless. Then he nodded. “You’re right, man.”

“Forgiveness is part of healing. Just let it go. What happened with Hatch stays with Hatch.”

Tanner looked a little ashamed. He nodded again. “That’s good advice, Vey. Thanks.”

We briefly hugged again. Then I looked over at Grace, who I knew the least of all the electric kids. “How are you?”

She smiled. "I'm good."

"They're taking good care of you?"

She nodded. "They're treating me like gold. You're going to like it here."

"I hope we get to stay awhile," I said.

"Me too. Welcome home."

"Electroclan," the chairman said loudly. "Welcome to Christmas Ranch. I am certain you're exhausted from your travels, so if you'll follow me, I'll show you to your rooms."

We grabbed our bags, then followed the chairman behind the ranch house, where there were two log cabins more than thirty feet long.

"We're staying in bunkhouses," Zeus said. "Women in that one, men in this one."

"See you in a minute," I said to Taylor. We quickly kissed, then split up. My mother led the girls over to their dorm.

The two bunkhouses looked the same, with stained log siding and a pitched, olive-green tin roof. Inside there was a loft that ran over two-thirds of the ceiling, looking out over the front. There were bunk beds extending out from the walls running the length of the room, four sets of two on each side, sleeping sixteen people.

The chairman said, "You can grab any of the bunks along the wall that don't already have sleeping bags on them. Or, if you want to sleep on the loft upstairs, that's available as well. There's no mattresses up there, but it's carpeted with thick padding. And there's plenty of extra quilts and pillows."

"How do you get up there?" I asked.

"That wood ladder at the end of the room," he said, pointing. "That door next to the ladder is the bathroom. There's a shower in there as well, but there's only one bathroom per house, so please keep your showers to a minimum." He stepped back toward the door. "That's it. If you have any questions, you can talk to any of the staff inside the main house. Also, I know it's late for lunch, but we have sandwiches and chili for you in the main house. If you're hungry, come over. They'll be closing the kitchen in about an hour. But there's always snacks."

"We'll be right over," I said. "Do the girls know?"

"Your mother will tell them," he said. "You'll have some time to wander around the grounds. We'll have dinner around six; then we're going to have a meeting."

"Where?" I asked.

“In the big room in the main house. We’ll ring the bell when it’s dinnertime. So don’t eat too much, or you won’t be hungry later, and we have fantastic dinners.” He looked us over. “You have no idea how happy we are to see you.” He walked out.

Ostin, Jack, and I climbed the ladder to the loft. The ceiling was low, maybe six feet at its pinnacle. There were gabled windows that looked out over the property.

“This is nice,” Ostin said. “I wonder how long we’ll be here.”

“A long time, I hope,” Jack said.

After a moment I said, “I wouldn’t get used to that idea. You know that just when we get comfortable, Hatch will do something crazy. If he hasn’t already.”

“That’s his way,” Jack said.

“Crazy freakin’ moron,” Ostin said.

Jack and I grinned.

“Crazy freakin’ moron,” I repeated.



We piled our bags in the corner of the loft and laid out some quilts and pillows; then Ostin, Jack, and I climbed back down and went over to the main house to get something to eat. The only one in the kitchen was a woman stirring a pot. She was tall with long silver hair.

"I'm going to go find the girls," Jack said, walking back out.

The kitchen was small for so many people, and most of the counters were covered with food.

"It smells good in here," Ostin said.

"It's garlic," the woman said, smiling. "Garlic always smells good. Except on your breath."

"Is that for lunch?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It's dinner. I'm making Italian. This is my Bolognese sauce. I'm also making meatballs and spaghetti. The chairman asked for something special since we're having a celebratory dinner tonight," she said.

"What are we celebrating?" I asked.

She looked at me with an amused smile, then said, "You, of course." She put a lid on a pot, then stepped away from the stove. "My name is Lois. I'm the cook. If you need anything, just let me know."

"Where are you from?" Ostin asked.

"I live in town," she said. "In Orderville, just a few miles north. But I was born near here in Kanab. It's about twenty miles from here. It's where we do most of our shopping." She gestured to the food. "We're having sandwiches and chili for lunch. Help yourself."

There was a sandwich bar with roast beef, sliced turkey, pastrami, and salami, and chicken salad with grapes and walnuts in it. There were all kinds of vegetables—tomatoes, lettuce, onions, cucumbers, jalapeños—and at least four kinds of spreads.

On the next counter there were plastic bowls filled with coleslaw and potato salad, and a cooler filled with ice and drinks—soda, juices, and bottled water.

Ostin and I grabbed paper plates and made sandwiches, then sat down at the table to eat. Jack, Abi, Nichelle, Taylor, and McKenna walked into the kitchen about five minutes after we'd started eating.

"Not waiting for us?" Taylor said.

"Sorry," I said with a full mouth. "I didn't know if you were coming."

"Of course I was coming," she said. "There's food, isn't there?"

Lois introduced herself, then handed them all plates. They made sandwiches, got bowls of chili, and then came over and joined us.

"I think my mom must have made this potato salad," Ostin said. "It's definitely her recipe."

"As a matter of fact, it is," Lois said. "So is the chili. How is it?"

"It's good," Jack said. "But it's not very hot."

"I'm sorry," Lois said. "I forgot to turn the heat back up. I can warm it up if you like."

"No worries," McKenna said. "I'll take care of it." She put her hand above Jack's bowl, and her hand began to turn bright red. Lois stared in amazement. It took less than ten seconds before the chili was bubbling. Almost habitually, Ostin handed her a bottle of water.

"Thank you," McKenna said. She quickly downed half the bottle.

"That was amazing," Lois said. "I was told that you kids had special abilities."

"You have no idea," Nichelle said.

Jack took back his bowl of chili. "Thanks."

"My pleasure," McKenna replied.

Taylor had made herself a chicken salad sandwich that looked really good.

"How is it?" I asked.

"Beats swamp eel," she said.

"My shoe beats swamp eel," Jack said.

"How're your rooms?" I asked.

"It's just one big room," Taylor said.

". . . and one bathroom," McKenna added. "That's not going to work for twelve women."

"There are two bathrooms and showers in here," Lois said, smiling. "You're welcome to use them anytime."

"Thank you," McKenna said.

Zeus and Tessa walked into the room. "Hey, guys," Zeus said. "After you eat, we'll take you on a tour of the ranch. We've got ATVs."

"I think you should walk," Lois said. "It's much nicer. There's a nice path down to the pond."

"There's a pond?" McKenna asked.

"It's more like a small lake. You can swim if you like. There's also a canoe. It's just down at the end of the dirt road behind the bunkhouses."

"Just watch out for rattlesnakes," Tessa said.

"Rattlesnakes?" Ostin said, looking suddenly afraid.

"We found one yesterday," Tessa said. "It was huge, like five feet long."

"A Mojave Green," Zeus said. "Pretty wicked."

"What's a Mojave Green?" I asked. I turned to Ostin, who now looked even more terrified. The only things that scared Ostin more than an empty refrigerator were sharks and snakes.

"It's bad news," Ostin said. "Only the most venomous rattlesnake in the world. Not only does it have the usual venomous proteins, but its venom also contains a presynaptic neurotoxin. Think cobra, man. Be very afraid."

"You don't need to be afraid, just cautious," Lois said. "No one here has ever been bitten, but we have antivenom just in case. Just respect them and keep your distance. And don't play with them."

"Who would be dumb enough to play with a rattlesnake?" Taylor asked.

"You'd be surprised," Lois replied.

"What did you do with the snake you saw?" Ostin asked.

"Fried it," Zeus said. "I'm much faster than any snake."

"I'm sticking with you or Michael," Ostin said.

"What's the matter with me?" McKenna asked. "Or don't you like being protected by a girl?"

Ostin seemed stumped. "I just . . . I should be protecting you."

"We protect one another," McKenna said. "In whatever way we can."

Ostin nodded. "That's intelligent," he said.

After lunch, Taylor and I walked out the back of the house down a small, stone-set walkway past an outdoor pizza oven piled high with cut wood. I took Taylor's hand, and we walked about a hundred yards down a tree-lined clay trail, over two cattle guards, to the pond. The pond was about three acres in size. Its water was bright blue, and there were ducks floating in it. One edge was covered in sunflowers and cattails. There was a boat dock on the south end, and on the east side a large platform hung out over the water. Tied to the dock was a long, green canoe with two oars inside.

"Want to go for a boat ride?" I asked.

Taylor smiled. "Sure."

We walked down onto the narrow floating dock, which rocked slightly beneath our weight. I held the canoe steady while Taylor climbed into the front and balanced herself. Then I untied the rope from the dock's cleat and climbed into the back of the canoe. The canoe rocked a lot, and I nearly tipped us over trying to get to my seat.

We paddled to the middle of the pond, the canoe gliding easily over the water. There was a light breeze, and the ducks took flight as we approached them.

Taylor laid down her oar, then carefully slid back toward me until I could hold her.

"I could live like this for the rest of my life."

"Like what?" I asked.

"A pioneer life. Simple. I mean, I know it's physically hard, but the challenges are different. Milking cows, planting, harvesting . . . you know, simple."

"Simple is good," I said.

"The world has gotten so complex. I sometimes wonder if all these labor-saving devices actually just make our lives more difficult. You know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"It's not like all these gadgets and appliances have slowed people down or anything. It just means they have to do more. The whole world just keeps trying to go faster and faster." She sighed. "Except for here. Nature is never in a hurry. You can't make a flower bloom faster. They don't read magazines to make themselves prettier; they just know they are."

I looked at her and smiled. "How do you know flowers think they're pretty?"

She smiled. "I can tell."

For a moment we were both quiet, listening to the soft, whistling breeze and the rhythmic tin squeak of an aged windmill. A dragonfly buzzed by above our heads, chased by another. Taylor looked up at me. "Why do you think Hatch does what he does? With all his money, he could live anywhere, do anything. Instead he makes himself and everyone else miserable."

"I don't think people like Hatch can find joy in simple things anymore. All that matters is power."

"I don't get that. I mean, what's power? Let's say he's suddenly the king of the world. What is he going to do with it that he can't do now? Is his food going to taste better? Is the weather going to be nicer? Will love feel better? I just don't understand that mentality."

"I think deep inside, people like Hatch are afraid. So they try to control everything. If they can control everything, nothing can hurt them. At least that's what they think."

"But he's in much more danger than if he just enjoyed life. Kings are never safe. There's always someone who wants their throne."

I nodded. "He's in much more danger," I said. "Just like we are."

"It's not fair. We're not after power. Why should we have to change our lives just because he does?"

"So he doesn't take away our lives," I said. "But you're right, it's not fair."

We were both quiet again. Then Taylor asked, "Did your mom say anything about my parents?"

"Not yet," I said.

"I wonder if my mom's told my dad yet." She shook her head. "How would she even begin? My dad's so skeptical about everything. He doesn't even believe that man really landed on the moon. I'm not sure that he'd believe her if she told him about me, you, or the Elgen. He'll probably just think she's crazy."

"Well, he's going to have to believe her sometime."

"I just hope they're safe," she said.

We stayed out on the water for another half hour, until the wind pushed us into the cattails on the far side of the pond. Then we paddled back to the dock, and Taylor climbed out first. I secured the boat to the cleat, then climbed onto the dock. Taylor started laughing.

"What?" I said.

"I just had the meanest thought. I almost rebooted you as you were climbing out."

"I would have fallen in."

She grinned. "Exactly."

"You have a mean streak," I said.

"Everyone does," she replied, laughing. "Some just hide it better than others."

After the pond we walked several miles around the grounds, climbing over barbwire fences and stepping over cow pies. There were entire fields of lavender and peppermint. Along one fence was a hedge of raspberry bushes laden with berries, which we stopped and picked. They were plump and sweet.

As we crossed the middle of a pasture, several cows started walking toward us. After what Ostin had told us about cows killing people, it made me a little nervous until I remembered the bull in Peru that I had brought down. *I could take down one of these cows, I thought. Bring it on.* Fortunately for them, they never attacked.

On the west side of the ranch, about fifty yards from the horse stables, we came across a dozen white boxes about five feet high. As we got closer, we could hear the buzz coming from them.

"What are those?" Taylor asked.

"They look like beehives," I said.

Taylor squealed as she swatted at a bee. "Okay, I'm not going any closer."

"I want to check them out," I said.

"They'll sting you."

"No they won't." I increased my electricity until I could feel all the hairs on my arms stand up. A bee flew near me, and there was a light blue snap of electricity.

"You're a bug zapper," Taylor said.

"More and more each day." I looked at her. "Want some honeycomb?"

"Yes. But you better not. They'll swarm you."

I walked closer to the hives. "They can't hurt me."

"But you might end up killing them all."

I stopped. "You're right. That wouldn't be good."

"Wait," she said. "I wonder if I could reboot them."

I was curious. "Try," I said.

She bowed her head, and I walked up to the closest box. A few of the bees ran into me, but I don't think that they were trying to sting me. I think they were just confused.

I lifted the top off the box. There were trays inside covered with wax and bees. It took effort, but I pulled one of the trays out, then broke off a piece of honeycomb about half the size of my hand. Fresh, golden honey dripped down my fingers. A few bees tried to sting me, but they basically disintegrated before they could land on me.

I shut the hive back up, then walked over and handed the honeycomb to Taylor. "Try it."

"Thank you," she said. "That was really weird."

"What?"

"You know how, when I get into someone's mind, their thoughts become part of me? It's like . . . I could understand them."

"You could read the bees' minds?"

"Sort of. I just . . ." She looked at me. "I could feel what drove them and their concerns."

"Bees have concerns?"

"Yes, they do, especially when you take their honey. But it's not individual. It's like they're all part of the same mind, and I could read their collective mind." She looked at me and smiled. "That makes me the queen bee."

"Yes, you are," I said.

She tasted a piece of honeycomb. "This is amazing." She handed me a piece. I put it into my mouth and chewed.

"That is like the best honey I've ever tasted."

"It's perfect," Taylor said. "It's been a perfect day."

* * *

The sun was setting, lighting the plateaus to the east in bright golden-pink hues. As we finished off the honey, we heard the clanging of the dinner bell.

"Must be dinnertime," I said. I took Taylor's hand, and we walked back to the house. As we were walking up the dirt road, we ran into Gervaso, who was walking toward us. "I've been looking for you," he said.

"What's up?"

"I was just making sure you were coming to dinner. There's going to be a meeting afterward. It's very important."

"We'll be there," I said.

The kitchen was crowded, as people walked past the front counter dishing food onto their plates. Lois and both of Ostin's parents were

serving from the kitchen. My mother was pouring drinks—lemonade, sweet tea, and water. Joel was next to her, helping.

“Do you need any help?” I asked my mother.

“No, we’re good. How was your day?”

“It was nice,” Taylor said. “We went canoeing.”

“And we got some honey,” I added.

My mother cocked her head. “How did you get honey?”

“From the hives.”

“Yes, I know where it is, but how did you get it?”

“We have superpowers,” I said.

She smiled. “Of course you do. Would you like some lemonade?”

“Love some,” Taylor said.

“Should we wait for you?” I asked.

“No, go ahead and eat.”

Lois had prepared spaghetti in Bolognese sauce with meatballs, garlic bread, green salad, and a vegetable soup.

We loaded up our plates, then went out back to the patio, where there were six long picnic tables. There were about forty of us in all. Taylor and I sat at the middle table with Zeus and Tessa. They had gone hiking and found some Anasazi ruins, including a large piece of a painted clay pot.

A few minutes after everyone had been served, Ostin’s parents came around to all of the tables with a tray of German chocolate cake and homemade vanilla ice cream, which they scooped out of a round metal canister. The sun had fallen by then, and the back patio was lit by large flood lamps on the back of the house that were swarmed by bugs.

After we ate, Ostin and McKenna came around carrying a large white plastic bucket and a garbage bag. They scraped the leftover scraps off our plates into the bucket, then put the plates into the garbage bag.

“How’d you end up with this job?” I asked.

“Ostin’s mom and dad are on kitchen duty tonight,” McKenna said. “So we volunteered.”

“What’s the bucket for?” Taylor asked.

“They put all the leftover food in it. It’s pig slop.”

“It looks gross.”

“It looks like the inside of your stomach,” Ostin said. “Except it’s not chewed and soaked in hydrochloric acid, which is, by the way, the same stuff found in some toilet-bowl cleaners.”

“That’s not making it more appetizing,” Taylor said.

“Then just think of it as unprocessed bacon,” Ostin said.

The chairman walked outside. "I hope you're all enjoying your celebratory dinner," he said. "I'd again like to welcome our guests of honor. But even more I'd like to congratulate them on their recent success rescuing Jade Dragon. It was a risky mission, to put it lightly. But, once again, they succeeded."

Everyone applauded.

"Now, if you're done eating, we'd like to invite you to come inside for a debriefing with the council of twelve."

Except for the staff, everyone, including my mom and Ostin's parents, went inside to the main room, an open space with a tall, stone-hearth fireplace at one end. Taylor and I sat down next to my mother. The chairman had a microphone.

"Welcome," he said. "As I said before, we are so grateful for the safe return of the Electroclan. We can't thank them enough for their heroism. The entire world could never adequately repay them for what they've done." He looked around. "Unfortunately, the world is blind to their own danger and has no idea what these young people have accomplished on their behalf, so our thanks will have to suffice.

"We would also like to welcome the newest member of the Electroclan, Nichelle. Would you mind standing so everyone can see you?"

Nichelle shyly stood. She looked both embarrassed and honored.

"We are so glad to have you with us. Thank you for your valor."

"You're welcome," she said, quickly sitting back down.

He turned back to us. "We have received reports from Ben, our Asian agent, as to what happened in Taiwan. The Electroclan performed bravely and brilliantly. They also barely escaped with their lives. I'm pleased to report that their efforts were successful and they rescued Jade Dragon. Had they not, we are certain that the Elgen would have broken her by now and would already have begun their work rebuilding the MEI and creating a new race of electric children. We are very fortunate that this isn't the case.

"So that takes us to where we are now. Yes, we have lost our primary facility, but that's all. Our sources tell us that the Elgen now believe that we have been destroyed, which is precisely what we hoped for. But there's more. Two important events have occurred, or are about to occur, that are of great concern to us right now.

"First, the Elgen are preparing to move ahead with their original plan of overthrowing the island of Tuvalu. They have acquired two new

ships, both with battle capabilities. At this point, there is nothing we can do to stop them.

“The second event may, in the long run, be even more consequential. Every despot has a weakness. Hatch’s is hubris.”

“What’s hubris?” I whispered to Ostin.

“Ego,” he said.

“Hatch sees any Elgen failure as an act of defiance against him, and he responds accordingly.

“After the Electroclan rescued Jade Dragon, Hatch decided to punish his top man, sentencing his senior EGG Welch to the rat bowl as an example to the rest of his force. Welch was being kept locked up in the brig of the *Faraday*, but somehow, while the Elgen were still docked in Taiwan, he managed to escape. We assume that he’s still somewhere on the island. The Elgen are hunting him as we speak.

“What’s most important about this twist is that we have reason to believe that his escape was facilitated by Hatch’s own youths, in particular, Hatch’s chosen, Quentin. If this is true, there’s a major fracture in the Elgen hierarchy. And that’s exactly what we’ve been hoping for. A house divided against itself must fall. If Welch and the Elgen electric youths combine forces, they might be able to defeat Hatch and take control of the Elgen.

“This might be the opportunity we’ve been waiting for. Up until now we’ve been like sailors in a sinking ship, running from one hole in the boat to the next, when what we really need to do is stop the person making the holes. If Hatch’s youths have turned on him, we have a chance to take Hatch down.”

“So what do we do?” Gervaso asked.

“First, we need to find Welch,” he replied. “We need to find him before the Elgen do. Rather than risk another escape, Hatch has commanded them to shoot him on sight.”

“How can we help?” I asked.

“Right now you can’t. Ben has organized a search. He knows Taiwan’s underground and streets. We’re confident that he’ll find him. Other than that, it’s Hatch’s move. So right now we do what’s most difficult of all. We wait.”

“Wait for what?” Jack asked.

“For Hatch to screw up.”



As everyone left the room, the chairman approached Taylor and me. He was flanked by Joel and Gervaso. “Michael, we need to talk with you and Taylor.”

“You need me?” Taylor asked.

“Especially you. What we have to show you concerns you most of all.”

We followed them down a short hallway into a room with a large television mounted to the wall in front of an oval conference table. The television was on, frozen to a newscast. I recognized the woman on the screen. She was Gretchen Holly, a popular news anchor on the Boise evening news.

“Have a seat, please,” the chairman said.

“It’s okay, I’ll stand,” Taylor said.

“It’s best if you sit,” he said.

After we were seated, I said, “Before we start, I need to say something.”

“Go ahead.”

“It’s about Timepiece Ranch. I’m really sorry that I told Hatch where you were. He tricked me.”

The chairman nodded. "Yes, Ben told me about that. If it makes you feel any better, that's not how the Elgen knew where we were."

"It's not?" I said.

"No, we made a critical error in judgment." He looked at Taylor. "Taylor's mother, Julie, was being followed by the Elgen, hoping that we would reach out to her. We fell for their trap. That's how they learned of our whereabouts."

"My mother led them there?" Taylor said.

"No, we did, when we brought your mother. We underestimated the Elgen, and we paid for it." He took a deep breath. "The Elgen have been following her for a while, which, unfortunately, is what we need to talk to you about." He nodded to his assistant, who pushed a button on a remote, and the video started to run.

"Tonight's breaking story, an Idaho woman has been arrested in connection with the disappearance of her daughter. Meridian resident Julie Ridley was taken into police custody after authorities provided evidence linking her to her daughter's disappearance. Mrs. Ridley has refused to cooperate with authorities and is currently being held pending bail. Ridley's husband, Charles Ridley, is an officer for the Boise police department and has been suspended following an internal investigation to assess his involvement."

I looked over at Taylor. She was staring at the screen in shock. When she could speak, she said, "When did this happen?"

"Two days ago. Your mother went back to Idaho to tell your father and prepare to come back with us permanently, but then the Elgen attacked the ranch and threw off our timetable. We had to delay our plans and they beat us to her."

"I need to go to Idaho," Taylor said. "I need to show myself to them."

"Absolutely not," the chairman said. "That's what the Elgen are hoping you'll do. It's a trap. You can be sure that the information the police are working off was provided by Elgen."

"I don't care; they have my mother," Taylor said.

Gervaso said, "Taylor, right now your appearance will raise far more questions than it will answer. And we're certain that you'll disappear again as soon as the Elgen find you."

"They can't charge your mother with murder or kidnapping without a body," Joel said. "How can they prove a murder's taken place without a body?"

"There's more," the chairman said, motioning to his assistant.

The woman advanced the DVD to another news clip.

“In an ongoing investigation, Boise police discovered more than two kilograms of heroin in a car belonging to Meridian resident Julie Ridley.”

There was footage of a police officer standing before a row of microphones holding aloft a plastic bag filled with white powder. “This is one of the biggest drug busts in the history of the Boise DEA. This much heroin has a street value in excess of a half million dollars. We’re happy to keep this off the street.”

The clip returned to the anchor. “In addition to the drugs, Idaho forensic investigators have found traces of blood matching the DNA of Mrs. Ridley’s daughter, Taylor Ridley, who was reported missing nearly four months ago. Mrs. Ridley is currently being held in the Boise jail. Bail has been set for a quarter million dollars.”

There was video footage of people screaming at Mrs. Ridley as she was led in handcuffs into the jail by police.

Taylor was crying. “How could it be my blood?”

“They took our blood in the academy,” I said.

“This is bad. Really bad.” She looked at me. “Michael, we’ve got to do something.”

Joel interjected. “We will. But in the meantime, you don’t need to worry. She’ll be safe in jail.”

“They can’t protect her in jail,” Taylor said. “If the Elgen have someone in there, she’s as good as dead.”

“They won’t hurt her,” the chairman said.

“How do you know that?”

“Dead bait doesn’t draw fish.”

Taylor’s lips pursed with anger. “My mother’s not *bait*.”

“In this case, she is,” Joel said. “They’re using her to lure you to them. If they wanted to kill her, they would have done it already.”

“He’s right,” I said. “They could have easily done it.” I looked at the chairman. “But we can’t leave her in jail.”

“No, we can’t,” the chairman said. “And we won’t. We need to extract her and Taylor’s father. We’ve asked Gervaso to come up with a plan.”

We both turned toward Gervaso. I wondered how long he had known about this and not told us.

Gervaso looked at Taylor. “First, we’re going to get your mother out. I promise. But it’s going to be tricky.” He looked back at me. “You’ve both broken in and out of much more secure facilities. The challenge here is, we need to rescue Julie without the Elgen or the police knowing we’ve rescued her.”

"How do we do that?" Taylor asked.

"We need to get your father to post your mother's bail; then, after she's out, we disappear with both of them. This won't be easy since it's not likely the Elgen will let your mother out of their sight. And, of course, we have the Boise police to worry about. Which brings up another problem. Your father is a police officer, and we're pretty sure that he still doesn't know anything about you or the Elgen. From what I understand, he's a stubborn man."

"As stubborn as a brick," Taylor said.

Gervaso nodded. "This is going to be a small, clean operation. In and out. My plan involves you two and Ian. Also, I have a friend we can trust in Idaho who will be helping us out with logistics. No one else. The more moving parts there are, the more that can break down."

I nodded. "Okay. When do we start?"

"Timing is critical. I'd like to be in contact with Officer Ridley by tomorrow evening. Boise is a nine-hour drive from here, so we'll leave early tomorrow morning."

"We'll be ready," I said.

"Good. We'll meet in front of the main house at oh-six-hundred hours." Then he added, "That's *six a.m.*"

The chairman looked at us. "Good luck."

As we walked out, Taylor said to me, "Thank you for helping me rescue my mother."

"I owe you. You helped me rescue mine."

Taylor frowned. "My mom must be terrified."

"We'll get her," I said. "And your father."

"My father," she said. "It's been so long since I've seen him."

"He's going to be happy to see you."

"Yes," Taylor said. "And he's going to be totally freaked."



PART SEVEN



Funafuti Island, Tuvalu

The Polynesian island nation of Tuvalu consists of four reef islands and five atolls, a total of about ten square miles in area. The islands are isolated in the Pacific Ocean, a coral oasis more than five thousand miles northeast of Australia and forty-one hundred miles southwest of Hawaii. The nation's population is less than ten thousand, making it the third-smallest populated country in the world. It also attracts few tourists, due to its remoteness and inaccessibility. The nation has one of the best of the Pacific island economies, with a peculiar source of income—their .tv Internet domain suffix, which generates millions of dollars a year.

The Elgen had built their Starxource plant on the largest and chief island, Funafuti, then dragged power cables north and south to five of the other islands. Even though the plant had already been operating for more than four months, the natives had delayed the ceremonial ribbon cutting to honor Admiral-General Hatch's wishes. Hatch had also insisted that for "security reasons," all non-natives leave the island before the Elgen's visit.

Of course, Hatch had delayed the ceremony to suit his own plans. The Starxource plant was the Elgen's fifth largest in the world, yet ranked near the bottom of their plants in actual energy output. But the plant wasn't built for power—at least not the electrical kind. Unbeknownst to the Tuvaluans, the plant was built to serve as the home base of the new Elgen operations—the Elgen Kremlin.

The vast majority of the plant was a bunkered fortress, with advanced weaponry and surface-to-air missile capability that the Elgen had clandestinely been stockpiling for more than a year, enough explosive power to demolish the entire nation seventeen times over and repel an attack from Australia or New Zealand. The plant also had an extensive prison, with more than two hundred cells and an advanced reeducation center patterned after the center in Peru.

While the people of Tuvalu slept, the Elgen fleet sailed through the cover of darkness, securing the waters surrounding the islands. At three in the morning the *Faraday* docked off the coast of Funafuti and, using the *Tesla* as tender, began shuttling soldiers onto their base. The *Edison*, the Elgen's new battleship, had taken up a defensive position off the southwest coast of Funafuti, and Elgen helicopters kept surveillance over the waters.

Tuvalu spent no money on military, and the small police force, dressed in British uniforms, typically didn't carry guns. In fact, the total number of firearms registered to civilians was twelve, and the entire police force owned just twenty-one guns, which meant a single Elgen patrol carried more weaponry than the entire nation. The peaceful Tuvaluan people were vulnerable to the extreme.

The Starxource plant's ribbon-cutting ceremony was attended by the entire Tuvalu administration—the governor-general and staff; prime minister and staff; deputy prime minister; chairman of the Public Service Commission; assistant secretary-general; secretary of foreign affairs; chief immigration officer; the police commissioner; the ministers of education, finance and economic planning, health, natural resources, energy and environment, trade, tourism and commerce, and foreign affairs; and the ambassador to the United Nations.

The UN ambassador was the one Tuvaluan official who had already been brought into the Elgen ranks and had, for some time, been receiving payment for his service.

The ceremony began a little after noon at the nation's capital, with a Tuvaluan proclamation of friendship followed by a traditional

ceremonial dance. Then the party moved, at Hatch's insistence, behind the walls of the Starxource plant.

While Hatch, his personal bodyguards, and nine of his twelve EGGs led the delegation on a tour of the facility, the plant's electricity was shut down across the rest of the islands and throughout most of Funafuti. A small commando squad of Elgen frogmen commandeered the sole Tuvaluan naval ship—a Pacific-class patrol boat—taking the captain and crew as prisoners.

All radio frequencies were jammed, and the Elgen's new amphibious vehicle, the *Franklin*, began the landing assault on Funafuti and two other islands, Nanumea and Nukufetau.

As Hatch had planned, inside the Elgen facility the leaders of Tuvalu were completely isolated from the outside, oblivious that their country was under attack.

After an hour-long tour of the facility, the delegation was seated for dinner in the large, crescent-shaped observation room above the rat bowl. The metal blinds were drawn so that the dignitaries could not see the actual bowl, and as Hatch had planned, they still had no idea how the electricity was generated, outside of the Elgen's standard explanation of a hybrid form of cold fusion and organic composting.

Two roast pigs were served for dinner, along with grass-fed Australian beef and lamb, salad, and sweet potatoes. For dessert the Elgen served two Australian–New Zealand favorites: Pavlova, a large meringue filled with fruit and cream, and Lamingtons, a cubed sponge cake coated in chocolate and coconut.

Hatch made sure that the best regional wine was available and had purchased three cases of a Penfolds Grange at nearly eight hundred dollars a bottle. The Tuvaluan dignitaries were well fed and slightly inebriated when the dinner was over, and a dozen Tuvaluan women, wearing ceremonial outfits with grass skirts and crowns woven from palm leaves, performed another traditional Tuvalu ceremonial dance.

As the dance concluded, one of the young women approached Hatch, dropped to her knees, touching her forehead on the ground between them, and then offered the admiral-general a flowered lei. Hatch accepted the lei but did not put it on.

Afterward the prime minister of Tuvalu, a slim, silver-haired man dressed in a white short-sleeved shirt, approached the lectern near the center of the room. He turned to face Hatch.

“Our esteemed benefactor and friend. In the Tuvaluan anthem we sing,

*“Tuku atu tau pulega
Ki te pule mai luga,
Kilo tonu ki ou mua
Me ko ia e tautai.
‘Pule tasi mo ia’
Ki te se gata mai,
Ko tena mana
Ko tou malosi tena.*

“Please, esteemed admiral-general, allow me to translate to your language.

*“Let us trust our lives henceforward
To the king to whom we pray,
With our eyes fixed firmly on him
He is showing us the way,
‘May we reign with him in glory’
Be our song for evermore,
For his almighty power
Is our strength from shore to shore.*

“You, esteemed Admiral-General Hatch, have come as a gift of the God above to bless our humble island nation. The gratitude of our people will forever shower down to you from heaven. I hereby bestow upon you, esteemed admiral-general, our greatest honor, the Tuvaluan star, and declare you a citizen of Tuvalu.”

The crowd broke out in applause, then stood in an ovation. Hatch almost looked moved by the gesture. Then, at the prime minister’s bidding, Hatch rose and walked to the lectern while the prime minister returned to his table.

Hatch looked out over the congregation, then slowly raised a glass of wine to toast the assembly of Tuvaluan dignitaries. “To a new day,” he said.

“To a new day,” the audience repeated, clinking their glasses.

Hatch set down his glass without drinking from it. “Prime Minister, dignitaries, friends, I am very much entertained by your ceremony and hospitality, as primitive as it may be. You have come here to celebrate the completion of a new Starxource plant, our thirty-sixth in the world. I say ‘you,’ because we, the Elgen, are here to celebrate an entirely

different matter.” He looked around the room, and his expression darkened. “Guards.”

At Hatch’s word a force of more than a hundred Elgen guards ran into the room with drawn automatic weapons. At first the confused guests watched with curiosity, as if the display of force were just another part of the day’s entertainment. But as the moment dragged on, their amusement turned to fear. A few of the dignitaries attempted to leave, but they were forcefully returned to their seats. The noise in the room grew as the Tuvaluans began talking with one another in their native tongue.

“Silence!” Hatch shouted. After all were quiet, he continued. “Today, you, the *former* leaders of Tuvalu, came to celebrate a new power in your country. In this you are correct. But it is not electrical power as you supposed, but political power. We are celebrating a new regime.

“While you have been here in our facility, our Elgen forces have been at work. Of course, our work started more than a year ago when we demolished your last diesel power plant and took complete control of your electricity.

“This afternoon, we seized your lone radio station, destroyed your phone towers, and jammed all communications. You are now completely cut off from the outside world. There will be no broadcasts and no phone calls.

“Our takeover continued this afternoon when we overthrew your navy, if I might be so presumptuous as to call it that. No one will be allowed on or off the islands. All seacraft have been confiscated or sunk, and our fleet is patrolling the islands, destroying anything that enters or attempts to flee these waters. Now you understand the true reason we insisted that all non-Tuvaluan residents be sent off the island weeks ago. We did not want any foreigners meddling.

“Your police force has been imprisoned in their own jails, and my Elgen guard has taken control of this nation. I would say the nation of Tuvalu, except it is no longer to be known as such. From this time forth Tuvalu shall be known as the Hatch Islands. Speaking the word ‘Tuvalu’ will be punished by public flogging.

“In this time of transition there will be many floggings. Those who do not attend the floggings, which will become my nation’s prime amusement, will be dragged from their homes and flogged themselves. In other words, you will enjoy the entertainment or become it.

“From this time forth the nation of Hatch is a dictatorship, and I, as supreme commander and president, declare your constitution null and

void. My Elgen forces have authority to make and enforce all civil and criminal laws as they see fit.

“To ensure that we have your utmost cooperation, we have established reeducation camps, where all of you, beginning right now, will be admitted.

“Prime Minister, you will now again come forward and bow down to me as your new sovereign and kiss my hand as a token of your allegiance.”

The man, visibly shaken, stood. He looked over his own bewildered and frightened subjects. Then he turned to Hatch. “I will not bow to you or any man. I bow only to God.”

“God,” Hatch said, smiling. “Where is your God in your time of need?” His eyes narrowed. “I will tell you where your God is. You are looking at him.

“As to you refusing my order, I was hoping you would. I made you the offer out of mercy, not desire. I had a much better plan for you.

“You will be stripped of your clothing, bound, and your tongue will be cut off; then, for the rest of your life, you will be kept in the central square in a cage with monkeys. You will sleep with the monkeys, you will be fed with the monkeys. And the good people of Hatch will be brought to see your humiliation and mock you.” Hatch turned to the audience. “From this time forth, this man will be known not as the prime minister of Hatch, but as the Prime Monkey of Hatch.” Hatch turned back to the prime minister. “For the rest of your life, you will live with the monkeys, and, someday, you will die with the monkeys. If you try to take your life, your sons and daughters will take your place. Do you understand me?”

The prime minister’s face flushed bright red with anger and fear.

“Do you understand me?” Hatch repeated.

“Yes,” he said bitterly.

“Mr. Prime Monkey, you are an educated man, so you have, no doubt, studied history. You will recognize that I have much in common with another great man who changed the world, the great Spanish explorer Hernando Cortés.

“We both came from the sea to a primitive culture who welcomed us as their savior. Like them, you, and your people, did not know that I came to rule you and claim your land as mine.

“But I am more merciful than Cortés. I will spare you and your subjects their lives. This revolution has taken place without a single shot. And even as it was with Montezuma, the great Aztec king, it will

be with you. In the end, your own people will turn on you. They will mock you in your new cage and stone you with their insults. They will sell T-shirts with pictures of you in your cage.”

“The joke is on you, Hatch,” the prime minister said. “Our nation is sinking into the ocean. There will be no Tuvalu in thirty years.”

“In thirty years,” Hatch said, leaning forward, “we won’t need Tuvalu. The entire world will be my footstool. Washington, London, Tokyo, Beijing, New Delhi, Moscow—these will be my capitals.”

“The world will never allow this,” the prime minister shouted.

“Of course they will,” Hatch said dully. “And they have. We do have our enemies. And they warned the UN that we were going to attack Tuvalu, and no one listened. No one. Including you. You were warned, and you didn’t listen, did you?”

The prime minister hung his head.

“The ‘world’ doesn’t even know that you exist. And they wouldn’t care if they did. The world has their own problems, not the least of which are their economies and the financial and environmental cost of energy, a problem to which only I hold the key.” Hatch looked around. “Speaking of economies, will the minister of finance please come forward.”

A small, thin young man timidly walked up to Hatch, his knees shaking and his eyes averted, afraid to look into Hatch’s face.

“On your knees,” Hatch said.

The man immediately dropped to the ground. “Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Promising,” Hatch said, nodding approvingly. “You, sir, should have been the prime minister. You’re obviously much wiser.” Hatch looked back over his terrified audience. “So, in addition to the changing of my country’s name, the official currency has also changed. Your money, the Australian dollar and the Tuvaluan dollar, is now useless. We have printed a new currency that we will, starting this week, exchange with the citizens of Hatch. Only the Elgen Mark will be recognized as currency. It is illegal to accept or to use any other currency. To attempt to do so is punishable by flogging, prison, or death.”

Hatch looked over the delegation. “It is now time for each of you to make a decision, one that will have lasting repercussions, so consider your choice carefully. You must decide whether or not you will accept my supreme command.

“You have two options. Though, in truth, they have the same destination, just a different path. Option one, you may accept fully, by

choice, an Elgen oath of allegiance with a covenant to follow and obey your Elgen masters. For those who make this wise choice, you will be treated with respect and kept in comfortable lodgings for the next six weeks as you are educated in the Elgen ways and groomed for Elgen leadership and success.

“Option two is for those who do not accept the oath of allegiance. They will be imprisoned for the next year in the Elgen reeducation facility, the portion of this facility that you did not tour. They will be subjected to an extreme physical and psychological barrage designed, and proven, to break both mind and will. In the end these former dissenters will, on their knees, beg to take the oath of loyalty.

“This is not exaggeration. We have reeducated thousands of minds already, of many who believed they could not be changed. These newly enlightened converts are among our strongest enthusiasts.

“But even after their conversion, they will forever be regarded as a lower caste, an untouchable. We will brand on their foreheads the letter *F*, signifying to all that they are a fool and a failure. They will be a pariah.

“So, to be clear, the only choice you really have is not whether or not to swear an oath of fidelity to your new monarch, as you will all eventually do this. Rather, the choice you have is what path you will take to that destination. I leave that decision to you.

“In just a moment we will take all of you, one at a time, into these side rooms to hear your decision. *All* except for you, Mr. Prime Monkey. Your vocation has been chosen for you. You will serve as an example to your people for the rest of your tortured days. You are clearly a man of the people. I’m certain you would have it no other way.”



By midnight, all but two of the forty-six Tuvaluan officials had taken Hatch's oath of allegiance. The prime minister, after a brief struggle, was stripped of his clothing, bound, and led away to a cell to await the surgical removal of his tongue. Hatch wanted the procedure performed immediately, as he wanted the man to have recovered enough to be in the cage the following day.

Outside the Starxource plant, the Elgen had overthrown the island nation. Hatch's plan of attack, which he called "the trident" for its three prongs, consisted of knocking out all communications, quarantining the island, and overthrowing the police force.

The Tuvaluan Navy had been the first Tuvaluan force to be overthrown, while, nearly simultaneously, Squad Captain Steele and his men, along with Quentin and Bryan, had stormed the radio station. Other than the station's simple security already in place—an electric door lock, which Bryan quickly cut through—there was no attempt to stop them. When they broke into the studio, they found two employees huddled with fear in the corner of the room, while a third, the station's technician, was behind the control panel trying to figure out why their machinery had stopped working.

The three radio employees were handcuffed and driven off by two of the guards to the Starxource plant for reeducation. The remaining guards took positions around the station, including one sniper on the roof, to ensure that no one got near.

Concurrent with the attack on the radio station, three other squads blew up the country's cell phone towers, disabling all phone communication.

Ten squads, a force of more than a hundred guards, subdued the police force and confiscated their weaponry, all of which was sent back to HQ. Since half the force was not on shift during the attack, several Tuvaluan traitors guided the Elgen to the remaining police officers' residences.

Another force was sent to capture members of the Tuvaluan elders, the cultural leaders of each district, whom the people looked to for guidance.

With their first objective met, the Elgen guard swarmed across the island like a cloud of locusts. As Hatch had predicted, there was little resistance, outside of a group of drunken natives on the smallest island of Niulakita, who were quickly tased and handcuffed and locked in the village center under guard.

The country's weapons registry led the guards to the homes of those with guns, and they were subdued and jailed. A squad was left to patrol each city block, in the event that the people began to gather in large groups.

At two a.m., the Elgen began transmitting a looped radio message to the people of Tuvalu.

Good people of Tuvalu. Do not be alarmed. Thanks to the aid of our allies, the Elgen, an attempted overthrow of our country by the Philippines has been averted. Prime Minister Saluni has declared martial law and authorized the Elgen forces to seek out those traitors who were involved with this planned coup. They may be your neighbors. We apologize for the inconvenience and expect your full cooperation in these perilous times. Those who do not cooperate will be arrested on suspicion of conspiracy.

The message, broadcast on the radio and played from Elgen PA systems, repeated every thirty seconds for the rest of the night. At six a.m., as the sun rose above the eastern Pacific horizon, the message changed.

People of Tuvalu. Prime Minister Saluni and the Tuvaluan defense forces have commanded all citizens to gather on the runway of the Funafuti International Airport by twelve noon. Anyone who does not attend will be arrested on charges of treason and aiding the enemy. We repeat, all citizens must gather on the runway of the Funafuti International Airport by twelve noon. Anyone who does not attend will be arrested on charges of treason and aiding the enemy.

By noon, four companies of the Elgen guard, consisting of more than five hundred men, lined up along the airfield, heavily armed with automatic weapons. The Tuvaluan people were herded in like cattle being driven to market. A raised platform had been constructed near the middle of the airfield, with the Elgen insignia hung behind it, on tall strips of draping fabric. The Elgen motto, *Absolutum Dominionum*, was plain for all to see.

Outdoor speakers nearly twelve feet high flanked both sides of the platform, which was surrounded by an Elgen company of a hundred and fifty guards.

About thirty feet in front of the platform, to the left side, was a rectangular structure about eighteen feet long, twelve feet high, and twelve feet wide. It was covered with a large sheet, with guards standing at each corner. On the opposite side of the platform was a wooden pole, about the diameter of a telephone pole, sticking up about ten feet out of the ground.

Waiting beneath the hot sun, the Tuvaluan crowd grew unruly, shouting out their displeasure. An hour later, at one o'clock sharp, the Elgen anthem played loudly as Hatch and his entourage arrived. Hatch walked directly up to a lectern with a microphone. He was flanked by four EGGs on either side, and Quentin, Tara, and Torstyn.

"Good morning," Hatch said calmly to the jeering crowd. "May I have your attention please."

The people continued shouting their disapproval.

"Your attention please," Hatch repeated softly.

Still the noise continued, even rose. Unmoved, Hatch nodded to the captain of the guard in front of the platform, who shouted out an order to his men. The guards fired their machine guns just above the heads of the crowd. The people all fell to the ground in fear. Not surprisingly, the shouting stopped.

"I thought that might get your attention," Hatch said. "I am Admiral-General Hatch, leader of the Elgen force. I realize that many of you feel

displaced and inconvenienced. But trust me, those of you who are here right now are the fortunate ones. Because those who have not come, whether from disobedience or ignorance, are, at this moment, being hunted down. When they are caught, they will be marked as criminals, tagged, and jailed. Those who resist will be executed on the spot. We will not waste time in these matters.”

Someone cried out from the crowd, “My sons!”

Hatch turned toward the voice. “Who said that?”

A woman raised her hand.

“If your sons are not here, they are criminals of the state. Pray that they do not resist arrest.” He turned back to the crowd. “The island nation of Tuvalu is no more. From this moment on you are citizens of the Hatch Islands.”

Another shout went out from the crowd. “Where is Prime Minister Saluni?” Then hundreds of voices echoed the query. “Where is the prime minister?”

Hatch looked at them with an amused smile. “You would like to know where *former* Prime Minister Saluni is? He’s right here with us. Captain Page, please unveil our display.”

The guards at the back of the covered box near the platform lifted the sheet while those in front pulled it forward until the drape fell in a pile to the ground. The crowd silenced. Inside the cage were about a dozen bald-faced rhesus macaque monkeys and, in one corner, the naked prime minister huddled in the fetal position. He looked pale and sick, his mouth swollen from the amputation of his tongue.

“The man who was once the Tuvaluan prime minister is now the Prime Monkey of Hatch. This is where he will reside for the rest of his life. Let his fate serve as a testament of our resolve. Those who oppose our regime will meet similar fates. Those who speak against the Elgen regime will speak no more. Those who *think* against the Elgen regime will be taught to think differently.

“I now welcome to the microphone someone you know well, the honorable Nikotemo Latu, your former ambassador to the United Nations.”

The ambassador walked up to the microphone. He tapped on it twice, then leaned forward, countering the blank stares of the Tuvaluan people.

“Citizens of the Hatch Islands. Relax, this is a marvelous day for us, the people of Tuvalu. Our culture and customs, our *tuu mo aganu*

Tuvalu, our way of life, is a new way of life. A better way. Welcome to a new world.

“The Elgen have come to rescue our sinking island, to bring us an improved quality of life. We are fortunate to be benefactors of the benevolence of the Elgen generosity. For those who feel uncertain, I bring a message of hope and wisdom. Accept the change. I know that change is sometimes difficult, especially when you are elderly. But are you satisfied with all that our island holds? Is our health care enough? I think not.

“For those of you who think to resist, do not foolishly hold on to hope that someone might come to your aid. We have no contact with the outer world. This is your new world. Accept it willingly, and you will come to love it.

“Those who do not resist will be treated with respect and will have a better future. Those who refuse to accept this great change will face much pain and difficulty. If you care about your families, your children, your aged parents, then you will do the right thing. There is no choice. All of this island’s leadership has signed an oath of allegiance to the new Elgen government. All except for the Prime Monkey. He has foolishly, selfishly, betrayed all of us and tried to cling to power. That is why his punishment is so severe. And he will be here, as a reminder, every day, all day.”

“You have betrayed us!” a large, older man near the platform shouted. He stuck his finger out at the ambassador. “You are no longer a Tuvaluan. You are a traitor.”

Two squads of Elgen guards rushed the man, while one of the squads stood with guns pointed toward the crowd, should anyone come to his aid.

The protestor was able to knock down just one of the guards before he was tased by three different guns, then beaten nearly unconscious by truncheons. The guards then dragged the man out before the crowd. He was lifted to his knees and pushed up against the pole next to the monkey cage. His arms were bound behind the pole, and a belt was cinched tightly around his waist to hold him up.

“Let this be a lesson for all of you,” Hatch said. “This man will not hear. He does not need his ears.” He looked down. “Captain.”

The Elgen squad captain brought out a long, serrated knife and cut off the man’s ears as he screamed in agony. Then the captain stepped back so all could witness.

“Does anyone else have a complaint?” Hatch asked.

Nobody spoke. Only the sound of crying could be heard in the audience.

“Very well. You learn quickly. Now I would like to introduce your new sovereign, the monarch of the Hatch Islands, King Quentin. You will obey and honor your new king, even as you would obey and honor me. He will explain to you the procedure you are to follow today.”

Quentin stepped up to the microphone as Hatch put his hand on Quentin’s shoulder.

“Greetings,” Quentin said nervously. “I am certain today might be difficult for you. But all good changes begin with difficulty.” Quentin lifted the paper that Hatch had given him and began to read. “We desire that all of you become citizens of the new nation of the Hatch Islands. The procedure to gain your citizenship will be simple. All you need to do is sign a few forms, declare your allegiance to me and the new government, and have your picture taken for your citizen card. It is that simple. Then, in celebration of your new citizenship, we offer a delicious, celebratory meal.

“With a new government there will, of course, be changes. One of these changes involves the currency you are currently using. The Elgen Mark will replace the Tuvaluan dollar. This will not be a difficult process. You will simply exchange your money at the Hatch central bank. You have two days to turn in your Tuvaluan currency. So go to the Hatch bank as soon as possible.

“Only citizens will be allowed to exchange currency, and you must have your citizen card with you, the one we will provide you with today. In seven days from now it will be illegal to use Tuvaluan currency. No store or place of business in any of the Hatch Islands will accept it. To do so is a crime punishable by imprisonment or flogging. The previous currency, just like the previous government, is extinct. Tuvaluan dollars will be worthless and burned.

“For those of you who have bank accounts, your money has already been converted to the Elgen Mark. And I have more good news. Those who sign the declaration of citizenship will receive an additional five hundred Elgen Mark, which can soon be spent at a new Hatch department store that will provide many goods and products that you have previously gone without. For this we have Admiral-General Hatch to thank for his generosity.”

Quentin paused for applause, but none came. He continued. “We expect that some of you might choose *not* to sign the declaration of allegiance. As long as you are obedient to the new laws of the land, you

will not be punished for your decision. But be aware that rejecting citizenship has its consequences.

“Noncitizens will not be allowed in any of the Hatch Islands community buildings, stores, medical clinics, or hospital. This also means that if you are now, in any way, employed by the government, your employment will be terminated.

“Noncitizens will not be allowed to travel abroad or even between the islands. Noncitizens will have no right to vote on issues that concern the people of Hatch. Noncitizens will also have no rights before the Elgen courts. If they are found guilty of an infraction by the Elgen guard, they will be punished immediately without trial.

“Noncitizens will not have access to electricity. And, finally, noncitizens will defer to citizens in all circumstances. You will ride in the back of the bus, stand in the back of all lines. You may not drink out of the same water fountains as the citizens. You are, simply put, inferior.

“As you see, the choice is yours. But once you make this decision, it is final. So decide wisely. For those wishing to declare citizenship, you will line up in one of these twelve queues to my right. When you reach the front of the line, you will raise your hand to the square and read the declaration you will be shown, in which you will renounce your Tuvaluan citizenry and declare your allegiance to the new Elgen government. Your photograph will be taken and added to our database, and you will be given a citizen card and number.

“For those foolish few who choose not to join the new government, you will go to the line at my left.” He pointed to the side. The line began next to the pole where the man, the lone protestor, lay bound and bleeding. “You will be marked as a noncitizen and injected with a device so that we can track your movements at all times. You will then be free to return to your primitive and impoverished lifestyle.”

Some of the people began moving toward the citizenship lines.

“Wait, please,” Quentin said, holding up his hand. “Do not move yet. In one minute I am going to give you the opportunity to make your decision. A life of prosperity and happiness, or one of poverty and deprivation. As we make this transition, it will be wise for you to stay tuned to your radio for further instructions. Do you all understand?”

“Yes!” someone shouted.

Hatch stepped back up to the microphone. “I would like to hear your acclamation for your new king. All hail King Quentin, three times.”

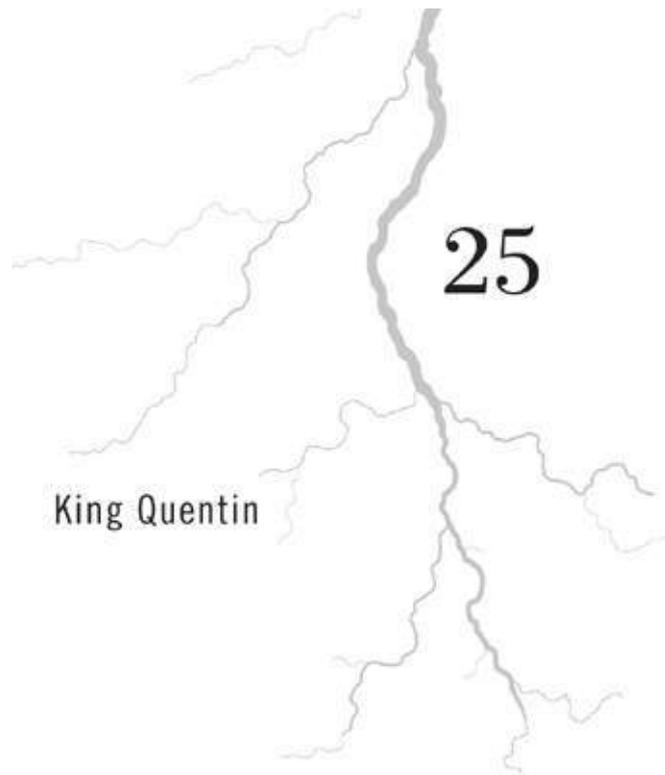
The people began shouting. "All hail King Quentin. All hail King Quentin. All hail King Quentin."

When they had finished, Hatch said, "There is one more thing. The first fifty people in each line who swear allegiance will be given another five hundred Elgen Mark. You may line up now."

The scene looked like the start of a marathon race as people sprinted for the lines. Some of the older people who were closer to the lines were knocked down or trampled by others rushing from the back. Quentin looked over at Hatch, who was nodding with approval.

"Just like you said it would be," Quentin said.

"*Exactly* as I said it would be," Hatch said without smiling.



Over the next week King Quentin and the other Glows moved from the *Faraday* into the royal palace, which, by Elgen standards, was modest and in need of renovation. Quentin, at Hatch's instruction, began building his cabinet—a group of counselors—to help him run the nation.

Early on the morning of the eighth day, Quentin was in his office looking over a résumé when Tara walked in. She sat down in one of the chairs facing his desk. “Are you growing a beard?”

Quentin looked up. “Yes. What do you think?”

Tara nodded. “It looks kingly,” she said. “So how does it feel to be a king?”

“It's not what I thought it would be,” he said, his voice dull. “You get these pictures in your head of what it's supposed to be like—probably from old King Arthur movies. But the truth is, it's mostly just interviewing people and paperwork. I mean, look at what I'm sitting on. It's an office chair. What I need is a throne, one of those big, red velvet chairs with gold leafing and a tall back carved in the shape of a lion's head.”

“Yeah,” Tara said. “And a scepter.”

"I have no idea what a scepter is for," Quentin said, grinning. "But you're right. I need one."

Tara laughed. "And a court jester. You've got to have one of those."

"I'd need a court first," Quentin said. "And we've got Bryan, right?" They both laughed. "What I really need is a crown. It's iconic. Nothing says 'king' like a crown."

"Exactly," Tara said. "Every king needs a crown. What kind would you get—one of the pointy ones, or the more roundish kind with red velvet on top?"

"I don't care. As long as it's made of pure gold and inset with a few million worth of jewels."

Just then Dr. Hatch walked into the room. "So it's a crown you covet," he said.

Quentin flushed. "Sorry, sir. We were just being . . . stupid."

"If every fool wore a crown, everyone would be king," Hatch said. He sat down, glancing over to Tara. "Would you excuse us, please?"

"Yes, sir," Tara said, immediately standing.

"See you," Quentin said.

After she was gone, Hatch said, "Quentin, have you wondered why I would make you king of a tiny nation when I could have just as easily turned all of the Tuvaluans into slaves?"

"Yes, sir. I have."

"This is not a kingdom," he said. "It is your classroom. These backward natives are not subjects; they are *practice*. If you are to rule millions, you must first learn to rule thousands. Kingship is an art to be mastered—like the foil or the chessboard—and the only certainty of kingship is that someone is always standing behind the throne, waiting to take your seat. If you wish to maintain a throne, there are certain rules that must be followed."

"What are those, sir?"

"The greatest threat to a dictator is not from without but from within. The first rule is, you must keep your subjects divided. A united people is a smoldering revolution. A divided people is a conquered people."

"How do I do that?" Quentin asked.

"You make them hate one another. Before World War Two, Hitler was amazed and disgusted by the hate the German people exercised toward one another. He harnessed their animosity and directed it to his own ends."

Quentin took out a pad of paper. "Do you mind if I take notes?"

“I would be disappointed if you didn’t,” Hatch said.

Quentin set his pen to the paper. “How do I make them hate each other?”

“You begin by teaching them that they have been wronged by one another—that they are victims of a grave injustice—and encourage them to embrace their victimhood.”

“What if they haven’t been wronged?”

“Everyone has been wronged,” Hatch said. “Everyone. And if you can’t find a potent enough current injustice, then borrow someone else’s. Find one that happened to someone else long ago and make your citizen a supposed crusader for justice. Imbue them with a sense of moral superiority as they trample the rights of others beneath their feet. Righteous indignation is the alibi of mobs and murderers.”

Hatch leaned back in his seat. “Unfortunately, the Tuvaluan people are of the same race and culture, as cultural disparity is the easiest way to divide a nation. But divisions in humanity can always be found. Turn men against women and women against men. Divide the young from the old, the rich from the poor, the educated from the uneducated, the religious from the nonreligious, the privileged from the underprivileged. Teach them to shame others and to use shame as a tool to their own ends.

“Make the ridiculous ideal of ‘equality’ their rallying cry. Let them get so caught up in their supposed moral superiority that they’d rather see all men grovel in poverty than rise in differing levels of prosperity.

“Do not let them see that there has never been nor ever will be true equality, in property or rights. Equality is not the nature of the world or even the universe. Even if you could guarantee everyone the same wealth, humans would reject the idea. They would simply find a different standard to create castes, as there will always be differences in intelligence, physical strength, and beauty.

“Don’t worry if your propaganda is true or false. Truth is subjective. It’s as easy to tell a big lie as it is a small one. And any lie told enough will be regarded as truth. In dividing the young from the old, do not teach the youths the error of their elders’ ways, as they may see through your propaganda. Instead, mock their elders. Mocking requires neither proof nor truth, as it feeds the fool’s ego. You will see that when it comes to the masses, the stupider the individual, the more they want to prove it to the world.

“The second rule is to keep the people distracted from the weightier and more complex matters of liberty and justice. Keep them obsessed

by their amusements—just as the Roman emperor Commodus gave the Roman people games to distract them from his poor leadership. A championship soccer team may do more to ease a public's suffering than a dozen social programs. If your subjects can name a movie star's dog but not the president of their country, you have no need to fear.

“The third rule is to teach them not to trust one another. An ancient proverb says, ‘Kings have many ears and many eyes.’ You must build a web of informants from within the population. Openly reward those who report on their neighbors. If your subjects don't know who is an informant and who isn't, they will never risk speaking their grievances.”

Quentin finished writing, then looked up. “Thank you, sir.”

“You will learn,” Hatch said, “that human nature is a game. Learn to control the few, and you will someday control the masses.” Hatch stood. “Give them hate. Give them games.”

“I will start this afternoon.”

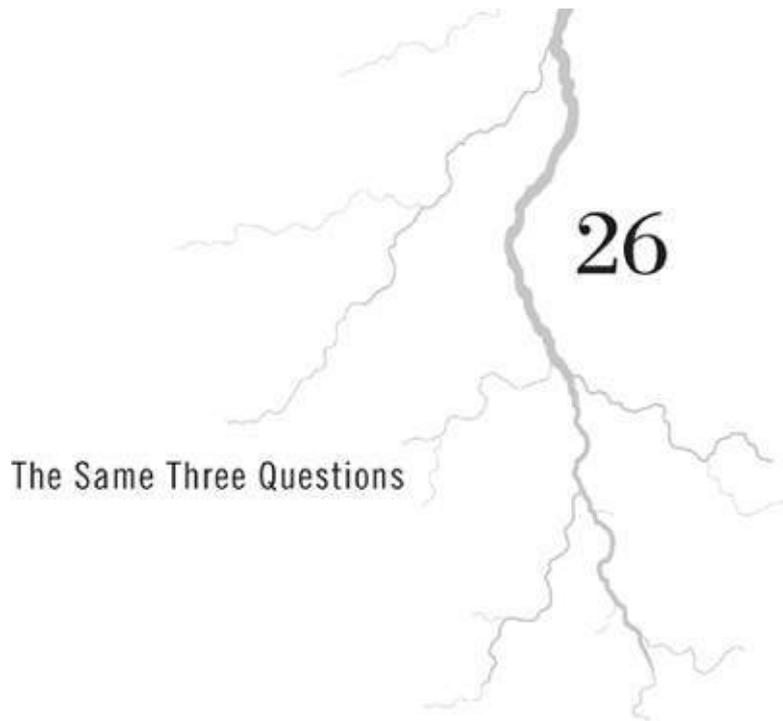
“Very well.” He took a step toward the door, then turned back. “I like the beard. Work on it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As soon as Hatch walked out of his office, Quentin called his new minister of public planning. “I want to build a stadium.”



PART EIGHT



Ada County Jail Boise, Idaho

Julie Ridley stared back at her husband from behind the glass partition of the jail's visiting room. Her usual meticulously styled blond hair was disheveled and slightly matted, and instead of a carefully accessorized outfit, she was wearing an orangish-red jumpsuit that hung formlessly on her frail frame. In just three days she had already lost almost five pounds, and her face looked pale and gaunt. Her eyes were puffy from lack of sleep. She didn't have to sleep to have nightmares. She was living one.

The Boise police had arrested her as she'd walked from her car to her home. They had searched her, handcuffed her, and then driven her to jail while detectives and a forensic team combed over her car and residence. Their search bore fruit—they found a large quantity of drugs, and traces of her daughter's blood.

It took two days for her arraignment and the judge to set bail. Because she was considered a flight risk, and in consideration of the quantity of drugs they had found in her possession, the bail was set high, at a quarter million dollars—almost enough to guarantee that she wouldn't get out.

During her time in jail she had been kept mostly isolated and was interrogated repeatedly by detectives who asked the same three questions a thousand different ways: *Where did you get the drugs? Where is your daughter? Why did you go to Mexico?*

Today was the first visit she'd been allowed since her incarceration, and her husband, Charles, sat on the other side of the thick, bulletproof glass window of a visitation booth, holding a telephone. He also looked like he hadn't slept in days. Over his career he had put more people in this jail than he could remember, but he had never expected to be visiting his wife here.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm in jail, Chuck."

"Dumb question," he said. "Sorry."

She didn't respond.

"Julie, you've got to tell me what's going on."

"I wish I could."

"What's stopping you? You're going to have to talk sometime. Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you're in?"

"I know exactly what kind of trouble I'm in. More than you do."

"What does that mean?"

She just breathed out slowly. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it matters!" Charles said. He leaned up to the glass. "Julie, you need to give me some answers, here. You owe me that."

Julie looked at him angrily. "I owe you?"

"I'm sorry. Please. I want to help."

"What do you want to know?"

"To begin with, why were you in Mexico?"

She slowly shook her head. "I can't tell you."

Charles groaned with frustration. He looked into her eyes. "Were you there to buy drugs?"

Julie's eyes narrowed. "We've been married for twenty-six years and you ask me if I'm a drug dealer? Who do you think I am?"

"Honestly, these days, I don't know, Julie. You tell me you're going to Scottsdale, and then you secretly fly off to some stronghold for drug cartels in Mexico and then won't tell me why. The police find a half million dollars of heroin in your car. . . ." His eyes welled up. "Then they find traces of Taylor's blood. . . ." He raked a hand back through his hair. "I don't know who you are anymore. I wish you would tell me."

"I wish I could," she said. "But the less you know, the better."

"No, the less I know, the less I can do to help."

"You can't help me, Chuck. No one can. They're just using me. And after they get what they want, they'll kill me."

"What are you talking about? No one's going to kill you. Who do you think is using you?"

"The people trying to get Taylor."

"Taylor is gone, honey."

Julie didn't speak.

"You need to tell me something. Do you know where Taylor is?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Did you do something to her?"

Julie slammed her hand against the glass. "How dare you!"

The police officer standing against the wall behind her yelled, "Control yourself, Ridley. Or I'll terminate your visit."

"Sorry," she said. She turned back and took a deep breath, then looked up at her husband. "How dare you ask me that?"

"They found traces of her blood in your car. What am I supposed to think?"

"You're supposed to think that I love my daughter, because you know I do. You know her blood was planted."

"Planted by whom? Who would do this? *Why* would they do this?"

"Bad people," she said. "It's a conspiracy."

Charles sighed. "Julie, when you say that, you sound . . ."

"Crazy? Paranoid?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you almost did." She breathed out. "Chuck, you know me. I'm not crazy. And I'm not lying to you. Have I ever lied to you before?"

Charles was quiet for a moment, then said, "Not until now."

"You know I've been framed."

"By whom? The same person who's leaving drugs in your car?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me who they are. Give me something to go on here."

Julie just put her head against the glass. "I can't. You wouldn't believe me if I did."

"You're telling me that someone just randomly picked some woman in Meridian, Idaho, to frame? Why would they willingly lose a half million dollars to frame you? It makes no sense."

Julie breathed out slowly in resignation, covering her eyes with her hands. "You're right. It makes no sense. Nothing makes sense anymore."

Charles just stared at her for a moment, then said, "You need to start giving them some answers, or things aren't going to go well for you. You

could be in real trouble. We both could.”

Julie slowly looked up at her husband. Her eyes were strong and cold. “My dear Charles, you have no idea what kind of trouble we’re *really* in.”



Chief Davis looked over as Officer Ridley opened the door to the chief's car. He waited until Charles was seated to talk. "How'd it go?"

Charles looked over at him. "Not well. She's suffering. She's afraid."

"I'm sorry," Davis said. "Did she tell you anything?"

"Nothing worth anything. She just kept saying that someone planted everything, and that someone is going to kill her."

Davis's brow furrowed. "Who's going to kill her?"

"She wouldn't say."

"Does she need a psychiatric evaluation?"

"I don't know. She seemed . . . normal."

"Normal, huh? We just found blood spatters and a half million dollars of heroin in her car. Hardly normal."

"No, I meant, she didn't sound crazy."

"Paranoid schizophrenics can be very convincing."

"I just don't get it. Julie's always been solid. She's as levelheaded a person as you'll ever meet."

"What other explanation could there be?"

"I don't know. I mean, the woman's a Girl Scout. She yells at me if I go a mile over the speed limit. She once drove a mile back to the

grocery store because the guy at the register gave her a quarter too much in change.” Charles shook his head. “It makes no sense. No sense at all. I don’t even think she would know what to do with the drugs they found.”

“That could work in her favor, you know. If we could show that she was forced into this, the judge could show leniency. As long as she cooperates. She could lead us to some major dealers.”

“She’s sticking to her claim that she knows nothing about where the drugs came from.”

“What about your daughter?”

“Same thing. She says she knows nothing.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I don’t know what I believe anymore.”

The chief was silent for a moment, then said, “I’m sorry, this has got to be really tough on you.”

“Nothing compared to how tough it is on her,” Charles said. “I just wish I could get her out of there. She’s a mother, not a convict.”

“A lot of convicts are mothers,” Davis said. “I heard about the bail.”

“A quarter million dollars,” Charles said, shaking his head. “That’s more than the equity we have in our home. I don’t know how I can get my hands on that much.”

Davis anxiously eyed Charles. “You’re not going to try to raise it, are you?”

“She’s my wife. I can’t let her just sit in jail.”

“Until we figure out what’s going on, jail might be the best place for her. If she gets out, she may just run off to Mexico again.”

Charles exhaled loudly. “I don’t know what’s happened to her, but I do know that I still love her. She’s my life. I just don’t know what to do.” He looked into the chief’s eyes. “If it was your wife, what would you do?”

Davis shook his head. “I don’t know. We married for better or worse, right? Bottom line, it’s a man’s job to protect his wife. The real challenge is knowing how best to do that. You’ve been on the force for fifteen years; you know as well as anyone that sometimes we need to protect people from themselves.”

Charles just sat quietly thinking. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Every now and then I’m right.” He smiled sadly. “Even a broken clock is right twice a day, huh?” He leaned forward and started the car. “Let me buy you some pie.”

“Thanks, but it’s been a long day. I just want to go home.”

"I understand," Davis said. He pulled the car out of the jail's parking lot and into traffic. Twenty minutes later they drove up into Charles's driveway.

"Home sweet home," Davis said.

"Not anymore. Not without her." He looked at the chief. "I can't help but feel guilty. I just feel like I should try to post bail."

"Chuck, listen to me here. I know you love Julie, which is why you need to be especially careful right now. Give her some time to get her head back on right, you know? If you post bail and she runs, then there's no turning back for her. If she's caught, no judge will let her out again. If she's not caught, you'll never see her again. It's a no-win situation."

"Yeah." He groaned. "You're right. Again." For a moment neither of them spoke. Then Charles said, "I'm going crazy just sitting at home. How long are you going to keep me suspended?"

"At least until her first court date," he said. "Look, heaven knows you can use the time off. Take a trip or something. Go see your boys. Or go up to Coeur d'Alene. There's some great fishing up there. You've given your all to the force for fifteen years; you deserve the break."

Charles took a deep breath. "All right. Maybe I will." He opened the car door. "Thanks for the ride."

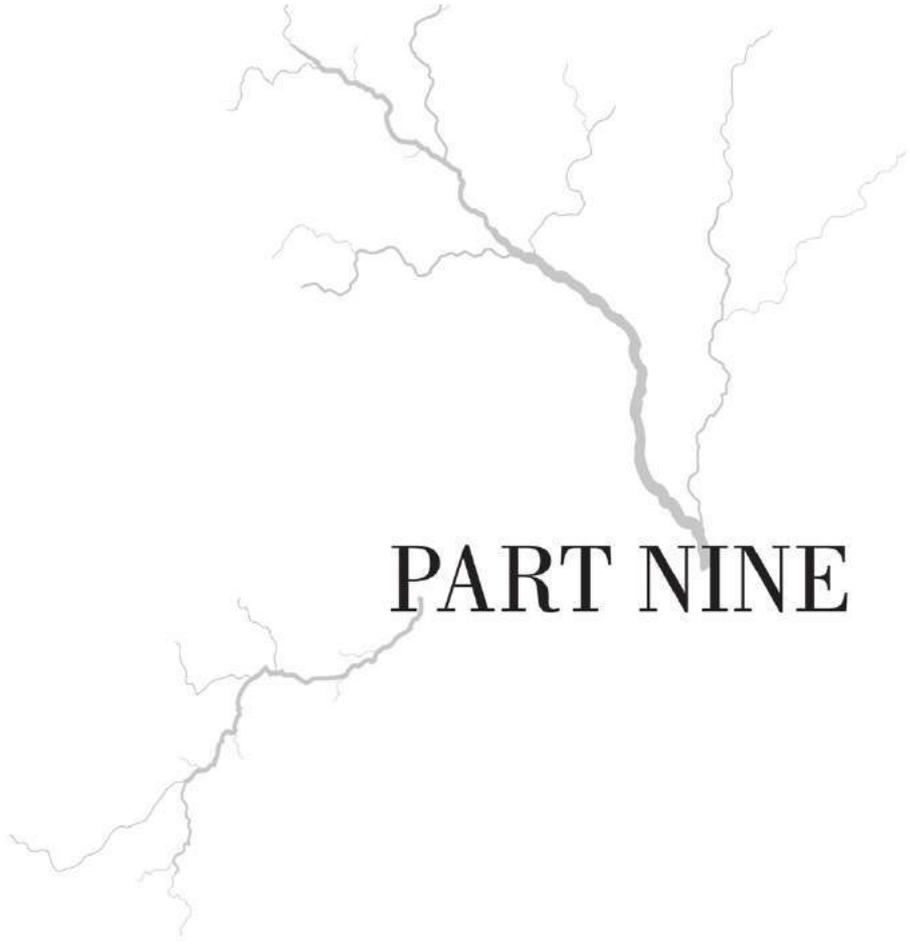
"That's what friends are for. See you."

Charles saluted him, then got out of the car. He stepped back as the chief backed out of his driveway, then drove down the street.

* * *

As soon as he was down the road, Davis took out his phone and dialed a number.

"It's me. We just left the jail. She didn't tell him anything. He's thinking about posting bail, but I'm pretty sure that I talked him out of it. . . . Yeah, I know. Don't worry, it won't happen. He'll talk to me first. If he tries to post bail, we'll arrest him, too. She's not going anywhere. . . . Yes, sir. . . . We still have his place staked out, a man on both ends of the street. If anyone tries to visit him, I'll let you know. If anything happens, I'll call. And please thank Captain Marsden for the bottle of Scotch. No one knows Scotch like an Elgen." Davis hung up his phone. "And no one pays like one either."



PART NINE



Earlier that day

The sun was just dawning when the four of us—Taylor, Gervaso, Ian, and I—pulled off the ranch road onto the freeway. The night before, while Gervaso had been packing the car, Jack had tried to talk Gervaso into letting him come with us, but Gervaso wouldn't budge. This was a covert operation, the fewer along the better. And, with Jack, there was the added risk of someone recognizing him. The same was true for Ostin, who had also asked to come. This was the first mission I'd been on without him.

Gervaso provided Taylor and me with hats and sunglasses to help conceal our identities once we reached Idaho. We couldn't take the odd chance of running into a former classmate or neighbor or even a stranger who recognized us. For all we knew, our faces had ended up plastered on milk cartons.

The drive from southern Utah to Boise took a little less than ten hours. It felt strange being back in Boise, especially when Gervaso drove past PizzaMax. I had mixed feelings about that place. I had mixed feelings about the whole city. It should have felt like home, but nothing

felt like home anymore. I didn't think it was the city that had changed. It was the whole world that had changed. Or maybe it was just me.

It was a little after five o'clock when we reached Boise, rush hour, which is what Gervaso had planned on. The more cars there were, the more difficulty the Elgen would have finding us. I thought again of what Ostin had said. *The best place to hide a penny is in a jar of pennies.* The last time we were in Boise, the Elgen had been hunting us. We were pretty sure that they still were. Why else would they have framed Taylor's mother if they didn't think it would draw us back? We needed to be ready for them.

On the way to Taylor's house we drove past Meridian High School. The marquee read:

CHEERLEADER TRYOUTS
WED-THURS AFTER SCHOOL

Taylor didn't say anything. Just past the school, Gervaso stopped the car on a side street, and Ian and I changed places—he got in back with Taylor, and I got in front with Gervaso.

"I'm first going to make a slow pass down the street to check things out," Gervaso said. "The Elgen set this trap, so we should assume they're watching. Ian, I want you to watch closely for anyone suspicious. Also for any cameras panning license plates. This car's plates won't set off any alarms, but it's not an Idaho plate, and that still might cause them to take a second look."

"I'll recognize an Elgen guard," Ian said. "But if they're not in uniform, I won't know if someone belongs around here or not."

"Taylor can touch him and see what he sees," I said.

"Brilliant idea," Gervaso said. "Look for anything out of the ordinary. We also need to see if Taylor's dad is home before we break into the house."

"What if he is?" Taylor asked.

"We'll come back at night after he's asleep," Gervaso said.

"Put your sunglasses on," he said to me. "Taylor, you and Ian need to duck down."

"Then I won't be able to see," Taylor said.

"Ian will see for you," Gervaso said.

Ian took Taylor's hand, and they both lay sideways in the backseat, with Taylor lying against Ian. I looked ahead, trying to act normal.

Gervaso slowly turned onto Taylor's street. "Here we go," he said.

"That tan car on the right," Ian said. "It's a police officer. He's got binoculars."

"Why would the police be watching their house?" I asked. "They wouldn't be expecting anyone."

"What is he doing?" Gervaso asked.

"He looked at us, but he's not concerned."

"That's my house up on the right side," Taylor said. "The tan one with aspens on the side."

"There are two cars in the garage," Ian said.

"That's my mother's van and my father's truck," Taylor said.

"I can't slow down any more without looking suspicious," Gervaso said. "So look quickly."

"I can't see anyone in the house," Ian said. "The lights are all off, so I don't think he's there."

"It looks empty," Taylor said. "But that's my father's only car. He wouldn't have left without it."

"Maybe he went for a walk," I said.

"Or maybe someone picked him up."

"All I know is that the house is empty," Ian said after we'd passed. "The front dead bolt is locked."

"Anything else?"

"Looks like we've got another one of Boise's finest up ahead," Ian said.

"Why would there be police here?" Taylor asked.

"Maybe they think the drug cartel will come looking for the drugs that went missing," I offered.

"That's a possible explanation," Gervaso said.

"Wait," Ian said.

"What?"

"I'm not positive, but it looked like that cop was holding an Elgen handbook."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

As we drove past the officer's car, he glanced up at us but showed no concern. I pretended not to see him.

"If they're working for the Elgen, they're most likely looking for Taylor, not us."

"I was right," Ian said. "It's an Elgen book. The Elgen guard insignia is on the cover."

"The Boise police are working with the Elgen?" I said.

"My dad isn't with the Elgen," Taylor said angrily.

"I never said he was," Gervaso said, trying to calm her down. "If he was, the Elgen wouldn't be staking him out." We reached the end of the street, then kept going.

"Now what?" I said.

"We wait until it's a little darker; then we sneak into the house." He asked Taylor, "Is that the school behind your house?"

"Yes."

"What's the best way to get to your house without being seen?"

"There's a gate for the school along Hampton Road. We can park there, then follow the fence up to my house. There's an opening in my next-door neighbor's fence that we used to climb through. It comes out behind a row of bushes, so we can sneak into my backyard and go in through the back. My parents keep a key under a rock near the door."

"That gives us about an hour before dark," Gervaso said. "Anything you want to do while we're here?"

No one spoke for a moment; then I said, "Can we go to PizzaMax?"

"Is that a pizza place?" Gervaso asked.

"Yes. We passed it on the way here."

"We can't go inside," he said. "But we can order to go and eat in the car."

"I'm good with that," I said.

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" Taylor asked.

"How can you not?" I replied.

She frowned. "Now you sound like Ostin."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Even though it was almost twilight, Taylor and I still wore our sunglasses as we drove into the restaurant's parking lot. Being back at PizzaMax filled me with unexpected emotion. I realized that I hadn't really asked to go there for the pizza. I was hungry, but there was something psychological driving me there. In many ways, PizzaMax was where everything changed. It's where I first met Dr. Hatch and Zeus and Nichelle. It was where my mother was kidnapped. Nothing in my life was the same after that night . . . especially me. It was the place where my fantasy of security was finally shattered.

I once watched a show on the History channel about old men going back to battlefields where they had fought as young soldiers. There's something in us that wants to see the place where we once battled.

Gervaso parked our car backward in the parking spot to facilitate a quick getaway should we require one. Then, leaving us there to wait, he

went inside, and returned twenty minutes later with an extra-large pizza with garlic bread and sodas.

“That’s a busy place,” Gervaso said. “It holds more people than you’d think.”

“It’s always crowded,” I said. “My mother and I used to come here for special occasions. This is where I was when I first met Dr. Hatch.”

“It was on your birthday,” Taylor said. “I was supposed to come too. But I’d already been kidnapped.”

“You really met Dr. Hatch here?” Ian asked.

“Right over there by the light pole,” I said, pointing. “Hatch wanted to see my powers in action, so he sent a GP to steal our car. As I handed the GP the keys, I shocked him. Then Hatch appeared out of nowhere, clapping.”

“Creepy,” Ian said.

“Yeah. Then Nichelle did her thing and I passed out. That’s when they kidnapped my mother.”

“Why didn’t they take you?”

“I think they wanted both of us. But before they could take me, Ostin and a bunch of people came out of the restaurant.”

We sat in the car and ate, though Taylor didn’t eat much. She was too upset.

Gervaso seemed especially anxious, carefully eyeing everyone coming in and out of the restaurant. By the time we finished eating, the sun had fallen behind the mountains.

Gervaso looked back at us. “Everyone ready?”

“I’m ready,” Taylor said.

“Me too,” I said.

Ian nodded. “Yeah, let’s do this.”



Two undercover police cars were still parked on Taylor's street when we returned, though not the same cars or officers. I figured that there must have been a shift change.

We turned onto the road past Taylor's, drove to the end of the street, turned, and then again passed Taylor's street, parking on Hampton Road, which ran along the south side of Meridian High. Fortunately there was enough light from the moon that the three of us wouldn't be standing out like walking glowsticks.

Ian took one last long look around as we got out of the car and made our way along the school's wood-slat fence to Taylor's backyard, about seventy-five yards from our car.

"It's right here," Taylor said. She walked up to the wooden fence and ran her hand down it until she found the loose slats and pulled two of them aside. "I can't believe that after all these years no one's ever fixed this thing."

"Do they have a dog?" Gervaso asked.

"No dogs," Ian said before Taylor could answer.

"There's a woman inside playing the piano. And a cat."

"That's Mrs. Glad," Taylor said. "She teaches piano to half the kids in the neighborhood. Her husband owns some kind of metalworking place,

so he's always working late."

"Is anyone in Taylor's home?" Gervaso asked Ian.

"No. Still vacant."

"What about their cars?"

"They're still there."

"I wonder where he is," Taylor said. "If he's at work, his car wouldn't be there."

"He's not at work," Gervaso said. "Remember, he's been suspended."

"What if he doesn't come back tonight?" I asked.

"If he's not back by tomorrow, we'll have to hunt him down," Gervaso said.

"Maybe he went on vacation," Ian suggested.

"With his wife just incarcerated?" Gervaso said. "I doubt it. Not if he loves her."

"Of course he loves her," Taylor said tersely.

We crossed the back of the neighbor's yard, then, on all fours, crawled into Taylor's backyard behind an overgrown hedge. It appeared that all the lights were off except for one—a small dome light in the kitchen.

"Are we still safe?" Gervaso asked.

"Still safe," Ian said.

"Does your home have an alarm system?"

"It didn't," Taylor said.

"If they installed one, they would put stickers on the windows," Gervaso said. "Ian, can you see an alarm?"

"I don't see any wires around the door."

"How about motion detectors?"

"Not that I can see."

"All right," Gervaso said. "Just be prepared."

"I'll get the key," Taylor said. She crept up to the back door, then squatted down and looked under a stone, lifting the key from beneath it. Then she got up, unlocked the door, and went inside.

"You're next, Michael," Gervaso said. "Then Ian."

"Okay," I said. I stood, ran to the door, and slipped inside.

There was a single light on above the kitchen sink. Taylor was standing to the side of the kitchen, looking at a large family photograph on the wall.

"I can't believe I'm finally home," she said. Then she reached out to me. "Come with me. I want to see my room."

I took her hand, and we walked out of the kitchen and down the hall. For a moment she stood in her room's doorway, just staring inside. I looked over her shoulder. "What are you thinking?"

"It looks exactly the way it did the day I left." She turned back to me. "They were expecting me back. They never gave up on me coming back."

"Of course not," I said. "They love you."

I followed her into her room, which was only illuminated by our glow. It was feminine, with a four-poster bed and pink-and-red polka-dot wallpaper adorned with large pictures of Taylor cheerleading. Pinned to the wall above her bed were two felt flags, one goldenrod, the other purple, with the word "WARRIORS" next to a picture of Meridian High School's mascot.

On top of her bed was a mountain of pillows and her cheerleading outfit, which looked freshly pressed and laid out, as if it were just waiting for her to return and put it on. Against one wall was a white antique three-drawer writing desk beneath a cork message board. The desk had a pewter desk lamp on one side hanging over a framed picture of Taylor and her two older brothers.

I picked up the picture. "Do you think about them very much?"

"All the time," she said softly. "I'd give anything to talk to them." She corrected herself. "I guess anything but risk everyone's lives." She breathed out slowly. "Why do I have a feeling I'll never see this again?"

I didn't know what to say. Finally I took her hand. "We better get back with the others."

We walked back out into the hallway and out to the front room, where Gervaso was standing near the front door. He held a small penlight in his teeth. He had taken the cover off the light switch and was doing something with the wires. Ian was sitting backward on the couch, staring at the wall, which would seem weird for anyone but him. To Ian pretty much everything was a window.

"Anything?" I asked.

"The cops are bored," he said. "That one keeps picking his nose."

"Thanks for sharing that," Taylor said. She sat down on a love seat.

"How does it feel to be back home?" Ian asked.

"It feels sad," she said. "Like a morgue."

"That's because no one's here," he said.

"Or maybe because I've buried so many of my memories here," she replied.

"What are you doing?" I asked Gervaso.

“Just throwing him off a little when he gets here. Sometimes the simplest distractions are the best.”

He put the switch plate back on and had begun to screw it into place when Ian said, “Someone’s coming. A police car.”

“One of the undercover police?”

“No. It’s a third car. This one’s marked and has a rack on top.”

Taylor walked over and took Ian’s arm. “That’s my father in the passenger seat.”

“Who’s that with him?” Ian asked.

“I think that’s his boss. The chief.”

“They’re pulling into the driveway.”

“I’m going to the kitchen,” Taylor said.

“They’re in the driveway,” Ian said. “He just shut off the car. They’re talking.”

“What do we do if the chief comes in with him?” I asked.

“We go out the back door,” Gervaso said. “Ian, tell us if the chief starts to get out of the car.”

“Will do.”

For a moment none of us spoke. Then I asked, “What’s going on?”

“They’re just talking.”

“Can you read their lips?” Gervaso asked.

“No. Now they’re shaking hands. Taylor’s dad just opened the car door.”

“Is he armed?”

“No. He’s not in uniform.”

“Give us the step-by-step,” Gervaso said.

“He’s getting out. They’re still talking . . . still talking. . . . He shut the door. . . . The chief’s pulling out of the driveway; Taylor’s dad is waiting . . . waiting. . . . He waves. . . . Okay, he’s walking to the front door. He’s taking out his keys.” His voice fell to a whisper. “He’s on the front porch. . . .”

Gervaso raised his hand to stop Ian from talking. We could hear the sound of Mr. Ridley’s key enter the doorknob. The handle turned, and a moment later the door opened. Mr. Ridley stepped inside, reaching for the light switch. He flipped it several times.

“What the . . .”

Still in the dark he shut the door and locked it. Then, as he turned, he saw us. Or at least our glows. For a moment he froze; then he reached for his gun before realizing that he wasn’t carrying it.

"We're not here to hurt you," Gervaso said. He turned on the lamp on the sofa's end table.

Mr. Ridley looked at us anxiously. "Who are you?"

"We're your friends."

"I know my friends," he replied. "I don't know you."

"Still, we are your friends," Gervaso said.

"Why is their skin glowing like that?"

"We'll explain later," Gervaso said.

"Mr. Ridley, you know me," I said.

Mr. Ridley's eyes narrowed. "Vey. What have you done with my daughter?" His hand clenched into a fist.

"You should have a seat," Gervaso said, motioning to an armchair across from us. "Please."

Mr. Ridley stood for a moment, as if not sure what to do. Then he slowly went to the seat and sat down. He looked at us for a moment, then asked, "What cartel are you with?"

"We're not with a cartel," Gervaso said.

"Are you the people my wife said are going to kill her?"

"No. We're here to protect her from those people. Like I said, we're friends."

Mr. Ridley just looked confused. "Did you take my daughter?"

"Again, you're confusing us for the other side. Michael rescued your daughter. We're the ones who brought her back."

"Back? Back where?"

"I'm right here, Daddy," Taylor said, turning the hall light on. Tears were running down her face.

Mr. Ridley swung around. For a moment he just stared in disbelief. Then he said, "Taylor!" They ran to each other and embraced. "My girl. Oh, my girl."

They held each other for several minutes. "I've missed you so much," Mr. Ridley said. "I can't believe you're really here."

"I've missed you, Daddy. More than I can say."

He leaned back, kissed her on the forehead, then hugged her again. "I just can't believe you're really here." After another minute he looked into her eyes. "Please don't ever leave us again."

"She didn't leave you," I said. "She was kidnapped. The day before you came to see me."

He looked back at me. "Who kidnapped her?"

"A group of people called the Elgen."

He looked back at Taylor. "Did they hurt you?"

She hesitated, then lied. "No."

"Thank God. I thought you ran away. The texts I read . . . they broke my heart."

"I'm so sorry. Michael told me the Elgen had done that. They must have made it look like I'd run away so you wouldn't get the police involved."

After a while he looked back at me. "You knew she'd been kidnapped?"

I shook my head. "No. I only suspected it."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't that simple," Gervaso said. "This organization is very secretive and very powerful. It's also international. If the police had gotten involved, the Elgen would have taken your daughter to some remote part of the world where no one would ever find her again. Michael did the right thing."

Mr. Ridley turned back to Taylor. "Why would they kidnap you? They didn't even ask for a ransom."

"They kidnapped her because she's special," Gervaso said. "Just like Michael."

"What do you mean, 'special'?" Mr. Ridley asked.

Gervaso looked at him intensely. "What I'm about to tell you is going to be a little difficult to believe."

Taylor took his hand. "Dad, you need to listen very carefully. What we're going to tell you is really weird."

"How weird?"

"Like aliens, UFO weird," Ian said.

Mr. Ridley glanced back and forth between us. He looked skeptical. "You're going to tell me she was abducted by aliens?"

"No," Gervaso said. "Not aliens. Worse."

"All right, try me."

"We don't have time to explain everything, but your daughter was born different from other children. She's electric."

He looked at us, then back at Taylor. "I don't understand."

"Michael and Taylor are both electric," Gervaso said. "So is Ian. They are three of seventeen electric children who were part of a failed hospital experiment. Electricity runs through their bodies. That's why they glow. It also gives them special gifts."

"What kind of gifts?"

"Michael?" Gervaso said. "Show him something."

I held out my hand, then pulsed, creating a grapefruit-size lightning ball.

Mr. Ridley stared in disbelief. "How did you do that?"

"Like I said, they're electric," Gervaso said.

He turned to Taylor. "You can do that?"

"No. I have other powers."

"Like what?"

She took his hand. "Think of something."

"Like what?"

"Anything. It doesn't matter."

"All right."

Taylor closed her eyes. "You're thinking this is crazy. And you still want to hit Michael for not telling you I was kidnapped."

"That's good to know," I said. "I saved your daughter. You should want to hug me or something."

"That's not going to happen," he said. "And you could have guessed that."

"Then think of a number," Taylor said.

He looked at us all skeptically, then said, "Okay. I'll play along."

She closed her eyes for a moment, then said, "You thought of number three thousand, two hundred and sixty-eight, our address. Then you changed your mind and decided that you're not going to think of a number so you can ruin my trick."

Mr. Ridley looked at her. "How did you do that?"

"That's my gift. I can read your brain's electrical signals—your *thoughts*. I can also reboot people's brains."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember that time when Ryan was in the final round of the spelling bee and the best speller in the state suddenly choked and kept asking over and over again for the word?"

"Yes. . . ."

"That's because I kept rebooting him."

"You were only eight."

"That's about the time I was figuring out what I could do," she said.

Gervaso said, "The people who made these children electric have been hunting them down. Michael and Taylor were the last ones they found. They tried to kidnap Michael, but something went wrong and they took his mother instead. They knew if they had her, Michael would come after her, which is the same thing the Elgen did to your

wife. Only they framed her and, we assume, leaked the information to the police. Probably an anonymous caller.”

“You’re right, it was an anonymous caller,” Mr. Ridley said.

“They knew that if she was in jail, Taylor would come to save her. And that’s when they planned to capture her.”

“That’s what Julie was saying,” Mr. Ridley said. “She said they were just using her to get Taylor.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Gervaso said.

“Do you know my wife?” Mr. Ridley asked.

Gervaso nodded. “I met her three weeks ago. In Mexico.”

“So that’s why she went to Mexico.” He turned to Taylor. “Did you see her there?”

Taylor nodded. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

“She was going to, at the right time.”

“She said she didn’t know where you were,” Mr. Ridley said.

“She didn’t. I left Mexico before she did.”

“Your wife did as she was instructed,” Gervaso said. “To protect you and her. Had you known the truth, you both would be in jail right now. Or worse.”

Mr. Ridley raked a hand back through his hair. “This is unbelievable.”

“The Elgen think we’re going to try to break your wife out of jail. But we have a different plan. You’re going to post bail and get her out.”

“I don’t have that kind of money. Not even if I put my home up as collateral.”

“Which is what you’re going to do,” Gervaso said. “You’ll still be about ten thousand short. But you’re going to suddenly remember that you have a special investment account that has fifteen thousand dollars in it. Then, after she’s out, we’ll take all of you to a safe place.”

Mr. Ridley thought a moment; then he said, “Just a sec.” He walked over to the coat closet near the doorway and reached inside.

“He has a gun,” Ian said.

Mr. Ridley turned back around, holding his police revolver.

“Daddy!” Taylor said.

“Just stay calm, honey,” Mr. Ridley said. “I know what I’m doing.” He looked at me. “Let me tell you what we’re going to do. I’m going to turn you in to the police, show them my daughter, and they’re going to let my wife go.”

“No they won’t,” Gervaso said calmly.

“Dad,” Taylor said, “put the gun down.”

“Six bullets in the chambers,” Ian said.

“You’re making a mistake,” Gervaso said. “We are not your enemy.”

“You’ve had my daughter, and now you’re using me to get to my wife.”

“We’re trying to protect Mrs. Ridley,” I said.

He scowled at me. “I don’t know how old you are, Vey, but you’re not too young to be tried as an adult for kidnapping.”

“Dad, Michael didn’t kidnap me. He rescued me.”

“Put the gun down, Officer Ridley,” Gervaso said.

“That’s not going to happen.” He pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. “You can tell your crazy story down at police headquarters.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I said to Gervaso. I reached out my hand. “Your phone’s no good. I’ve already scrambled it.”

Mr. Ridley looked down at his phone, then back up. “What are you doing?”

I took a step toward him. “Now put the gun down or I’ll take it from you.”

He looked at me anxiously. “Stop right there. If you don’t think I’ll shoot, you’re mistaken.”

“No, I just don’t care if you do.” I put my hand out. “Try it.”

He leveled the gun at my chest. “Don’t try me, Vey.”

“Dad, don’t!” Taylor shouted.

“Go on, Mr. Ridley. Shoot me. At least try to.”

His hand was trembling. Finally he said, “You’re just a kid.” Then he pointed the gun at Gervaso. “But he’s not.”

That’s when I blasted him.



Officer Ridley groaned out as he woke on the couch we had laid him on. He looked at me. “What did you do to me?”

“I did what I do. I shocked you. You gave me no choice.”

“Could you have electrocuted me?”

I nodded. “If I had to.”

He was quiet again.

“That was really stupid,” Gervaso said. “Use your head, Officer. You’re wasting valuable time.”

“He’s right, Dad, we don’t have much time. You have to trust me. If you don’t get Mom out of jail, the Elgen will kill her. You can’t let that happen.” Her voice cracked. “And you’ll lose me again too.”

“Trust me,” Gervaso said to Taylor. “The Elgen will kill your father, too.”

Taylor took her father’s hand. “These are my friends, Dad. They’ve saved my life. You have to trust them. You have to trust me. You just have to.”

He was quiet as he thought for a moment; then he said, “Read my mind again.”

Suddenly a pleasant smile crossed her face.

“What do you see?” he asked softly.

"A memory. I was a little girl. You're reading me a bedtime story. *Love You Forever.*"

"That was our story," Mr. Ridley said.

Taylor nodded. Then her expression changed. She let out a small gasp; then she began to cry.

"You really can read my mind, can't you?" he said.

"What is it?" I asked.

Mr. Ridley turned to me. "When Taylor was four, she fell into the water at Boise Creek Falls. I dove in and saved her."

"You've always been there for me," Taylor said. "Please, don't let me down now. I need your help to save Mom."

He looked at her for a moment, then took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. Everything's been so crazy lately, I don't know what to believe." He breathed out slowly. "But who should I believe over my daughter?"

I looked at Taylor. "Is he telling the truth?"

She looked at me. "Yes."

"What do I need to do?" Mr. Ridley asked.

"There's a bail bondsman on Cole Street," Gervaso said.

"Hot Dawg Bail Bonds," Mr. Ridley said.

"That's the one. Go there first thing in the morning and talk to Troy. He already has all your paperwork complete. He'll help you post bail. I'm sure you're familiar with the procedure."

"Of course."

"You'll have to go out the back and take our car."

"Why?"

"Because you're being watched."

Mr. Ridley looked surprised. "By whom?"

"By your own police," Gervaso said. "There are undercover police on both ends of the street. I'm surprised you didn't notice them."

Mr. Ridley looked upset. "So am I."

"One of them had an Elgen manual," Gervaso said. "They might be part of the system."

"That's not possible."

"Trust me, everything's possible. And nothing's what it seems to be."

"Including my daughter," Mr. Ridley said.

"Officer Ridley," Gervaso said, "timing is critical. You must be at the bail bond office by six forty-five. Troy will be opening early for you. Then come back to the house. At eight forty-five you'll take your car to the jail and wait for your wife to be released at nine o'clock. Everything will need to happen quickly. The moment you post bail, the Elgen will

know. They'll be waiting for you when your wife steps out of the jail. You'll both be in danger. That's where we step in. Tomorrow morning I'll tell you the rest of the plan."

Mr. Ridley looked at us solemnly. "Whatever you say." He put his arm around Taylor and pulled her close. "Whatever it takes to protect my family."

"You can count on us to do the same," Gervaso said. "Now, I'm sure you'd like to spend some time with your daughter, so we'll leave you alone. We have some things to do to prepare for tomorrow." He turned to Ian and me. "Let's go. I need your help getting some things out of the car."

As we started to go, Mr. Ridley said, "Just a moment."

We all turned back.

"Thank you for bringing my daughter back. Especially you, Michael."

"It was my pleasure," I said.

"Good night," Gervaso said. "And don't stay up too late. You're going to need your rest."



PART TEN



The next morning, 9:17 a.m.

Chief Davis was sitting next to his wife at his kitchen table, drinking a coffee and reading the morning paper, when his phone rang. He didn't recognize the number but answered anyway.

"Davis here."

"We seem to have a problem, Chief," a voice said.

"Who is this?"

"This is Captain Marsden."

Davis was shocked. "Captain. It's an honor."

"No, it's a problem. It would seem that Officer Ridley has decided to post bail."

The news caught Davis off guard. "What? But he said . . ."

"I don't care what he said, Chief. He intends to post bail."

"That's no problem. It will take him at least an hour to do the paperwork and get to the jail. We'll arrest him on the way."

"He's already at the jail," Marsden said. "In fact, he's about to leave with his wife."

"That's not possible," Davis said.

"It's reality, Chief. Either you take care of this or we will."

"I'm on it," Davis said. "We'll initiate backup plan two. We have two men on Ridley's street, and we'll arrest Ridley the minute he pulls out of the jail."

"I suggest you hurry, Chief. Because, by my calculations, that's in about twelve minutes."

"I'll be right there. And don't worry. She's going to be wearing a GPS ankle bracelet, so they can't elude us, even if they try." He hung up, then set down his coffee. "I've got to run," he said to his wife.

"Something wrong?"

"Nothing I can't fix," he said.

* * *

Davis sped to the jail. As he pulled into the jail's parking lot, he saw Ridley's car parked up against the north retaining wall. He pulled his car into the lot opposite Ridley's, about forty yards from the jail's front door. As he put his car into park, his phone rang.

"Davis."

"Glad you could make it," Marsden said.

"Where are you?" Davis asked.

"That's not important. The paperwork is done. Ridley's wife has been released into his custody. She's changing her clothes. They're about to come out."

"We're ready," Davis said. "His home has been taken care of. I've got two officers on their way now. We'll arrest him as he pulls out."

"I'll be watching," Marsden said. "If you miss him, we'll blow up his car."

"Don't do that," Davis said. "You can't imagine the bureaucratic mess that will be."

"Then don't screw this up."

"Wait, I think that's them. Hold on." The jail door opened, and Officer Ridley stepped out with his wife. Charles quickly glanced around, then walked toward his car.

"That's him," Davis said, slightly slumping down in his seat.

"We have eyes on him too," Marsden said.

When Officer Ridley reached his car, he and his wife hugged and kissed. He opened the passenger door and waited for her to get in; then he walked around to the other side of the vehicle.

Just then a white police van drove up behind the car and stopped, temporarily blocking Ridley's car from view.

"I've lost visual," Marsden said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Davis said. “He can’t pull out with that van behind him.”

As the van pulled ahead, Ridley’s reverse lights illuminated; then the car started to back out of the parking place.

“Okay, I’m on him,” Davis said.

That’s when the car exploded.

Almost every car alarm in the parking lot sounded off as the fire raged white-hot.

“What did you do?” Davis shouted at Marsden. “I said to give me a chance to arrest him.”

“We didn’t do that,” Marsden said.

“Well, we sure didn’t,” Davis said. “If you didn’t do it, who did?”

“Perhaps the resistance wanted them silenced.”

“I thought you said the resistance was destroyed.”

“Not everyone. Not the Electroclan.”

“They’re the parents of one of the Electroclan. The Electroclan aren’t going to kill their own parents. Holy crap, how much explosive did they use?”



PART ELEVEN



Charles held his wife tightly as Gervaso pulled the police van out of the jail's parking lot. She was crying, and all he could say was, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

I had already deactivated the ankle tracking bracelet she wore with a massive pulse that shorted out the device.

"Mom," Taylor said.

Mrs. Ridley turned back. "Taylor!"

They hugged over the seat. "You made it back. I was so worried," Mrs. Ridley said.

"We're together again. That's what matters."

"With a little luck we'll keep it that way," Gervaso said. "What's going on back there, Ian?"

Ian grinned. "Shock and awe, baby. Shock and awe. The Elgen are sitting in their cars on the east side of the building. The chief just got out of his car to survey the damage, but it's way too hot for him to get close."

"What happens when they don't find a body?" Mr. Ridley asked.

"They won't expect to find a body," Gervaso said. "We filled the car with two hundred pounds of rust thermite. It burns at four thousand degrees. That's hot enough to melt the asphalt beneath it. By the time it

stops burning, the car will be nothing but a puddle of molten metal. Everything else will be ashes." He glanced at Mrs. Ridley in the rearview mirror. "It's good to see you again, Julie."

"Thank you," Mrs. Ridley said, still cuddled up in her husband's arms. "I didn't think you'd be able to save me—with all the police and all. . . ."

"Mom, you should have seen the Starxource plant in Taiwan. The jail's security was like a day care compared to that."

Mrs. Ridley laughed. "I'm just glad you made it back."

"Where are we going now?" Mr. Ridley asked.

"We're ditching the van," Gervaso said. "It was caught on video surveillance. They may suspect it of being involved with the explosion and start looking for it."

"Where do we do that?"

"Where we left the car this morning," he said. "It's at a warehouse in Nampa. We'll exchange cars, then head south to our ranch. The sooner we get out of Idaho, the better. The Elgen are cautious. They won't just automatically assume you were killed. If they don't find your bodies, they'll keep looking."

* * *

There had been an accident on the freeway, so the drive to Nampa took about ten tense minutes longer than it should have. As we drove, Gervaso scanned the radio until he found a news station reporting the explosion. A spokesman for the Ada County Jail stated that they believed the explosion had been perpetrated by a local gang who had threatened retaliation after one of their gang members had been arrested last month.

"We're doing everything in our power to bring the guilty parties to justice," the spokesman said.

A reporter asked, "Was anyone hurt in the explosion?"

The spokesman hesitated. "We have no comment on that just yet."

* * *

When we reached Nampa, Gervaso dialed a number on his cell phone, then spoke just two words, "We're here." We then drove slowly along a quarter-mile section of warehouses, mostly protected behind tall chain-link fences with razor wire on top. At one of the entrances a Hispanic

man wearing a navy-blue mechanic's jumpsuit pushed open a gate as we approached.

"Everything look good?" Gervaso asked Ian.

"No one here but the man," he said. "He has a gun."

"As he should," Gervaso said.

Gervaso drove the van through the gate, and the man closed and chained it behind us. We then drove into an open warehouse, and a metal overhead door rolled down after us. After the door was shut, Gervaso turned off the van and said, "You can all get out."

As we climbed out of the van, the Hispanic man walked in through a side door. He wore a large grin. "*Hola*, Gervaso."

The two men hugged; then the man grabbed one end of the van's police decal and pulled it off.

"It looks very much real," he said. "I do good work."

"Yes, you do good work," Gervaso said. "Now destroy it."

The man looked at us. "Would your friends like something to drink? I have a soda machine." He pointed to an upright soft drink vending machine.

"Yes, please," Taylor said.

"Help yourself. You do not need coins," the man said. He walked to the side of the room and opened the front of a Coca-Cola machine. "Please, help yourself."

Ian, Taylor, and I walked over to the machine. I grabbed a cold root beer.

"There's no beer in that machine, is there?" Mr. Ridley asked.

"No, sir," the man replied. "I'm sorry."

"You want something, Gervaso?" I asked.

"Just some water."

"There's no water in here," I said.

"The water is in the small refrigerator," the man said. "On the ground."

I pulled out a bottle and threw it to Gervaso. He caught it. "*Gracias*."

"Señor Gervaso, I heard on the news that there was an explosion at the jail."

"Yes, we heard that too," he said.

The man nodded. "Very nice."

"Did they say anything about the police van?" Gervaso asked.

"No. Not a word."

"That's good," Gervaso said. "What did you get for us?"

"It's over here." The two of them walked over to a car covered with a canvas tarp. "If you'll give me a hand, please."

The men pulled the cover off, revealing a black Chevy Suburban with tinted windows. "This is what I have for you to drive. It is full of gas. The windows are bulletproof."

"Perfect," Gervaso said. "That will do nicely. Have you been paid?"

"Yes, they took care of me." The man reached into his pocket and pulled out some keys and handed them to Gervaso. "I think you need to leave quickly. It is always good to see you, Gervaso."

"My pleasure," Gervaso said. "Thank you for your help."

"That would be my pleasure. What would you like me to do with the money after I sell the van?"

"Keep it," Gervaso said. "But paint the van and hold off a couple months before you list it."

"*Muchas gracias*," he replied. "*Muchas, muchas gracias*." He looked at us. "Please, have more drinks on me."

I took an extra bottle of root beer as the man walked over to the warehouse door.

"Let's get back to the ranch," Gervaso said. "Everyone, get in."

I climbed into the very back of the car, while Taylor and her parents sat in the middle and Ian rode in front with Gervaso.

"I can keep you company back there," Taylor said to me.

"No, you and your father have a lot to catch up on," I said.

Gervaso thanked the man again, and we drove out of the small compound. As we pulled onto the freeway, Gervaso said, "Keep your eyes open for anything suspicious. We're not out of the woods yet."

"Look," Taylor said. "You can still see the smoke."

There was a thin gray column of smoke about ten miles from us.

"How long does thermite burn?" I asked.

"It burns quickly, but the heat will remain awhile. It will be an hour before they can really examine the wreckage. If there's anything left of it."

* * *

About two miles past the Utah-Idaho border, Gervaso's phone rang. He picked it up.

"Yes, we have them both. We're on our way back. We just crossed into Utah. Okay, we'll talk tonight."

He turned off the phone and set it back in his shirt pocket. After a moment he looked back. "They were preparing rooms," he said to the

Ridleys. "They were making sure we'd gotten out all right. And that we were bringing back a couple extra guests."

"Thank you again," Mrs. Ridley said.

"How far is it to the ranch?" Mr. Ridley asked.

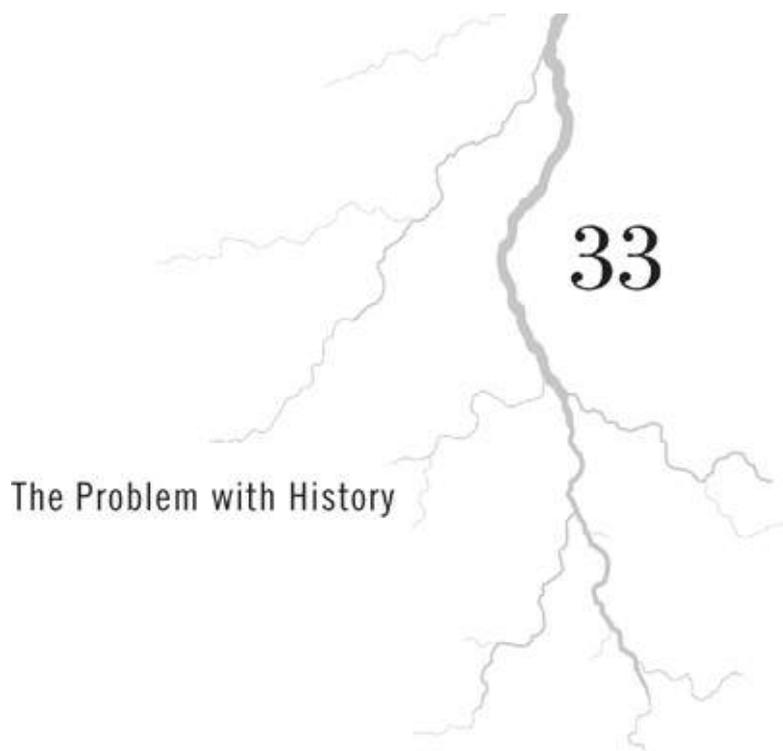
"Other end of the state. So you have some time to relax."

Mr. Ridley leaned back with his arm still around his wife. "We can't ever go back," he said softly. "Ever." He breathed out heavily as he looked into his wife's eyes. "In a blink of an eye my entire world has changed."

Mrs. Ridley shook her head. "No, honey. Your world changed long before today. You just didn't get the memo."



PART TWELVE



Admiral-General Hatch stood at the front of the great meeting room in the Hatch Islands Starxource plant. Assembled around the long table were Quentin, the three remaining Elgen board members, and the eleven EGGs.

Hatch, who insisted on punctuality, had made them wait for more than an hour in silence to build their anticipation for what he had to say. As he walked into the room, flanked by two guards, everyone rose to their feet, snapping to attention. No one looked the admiral-general in the eye. To do so was to risk being singled out. Hatch walked to the front of the room and looked over his audience, then said, "Be seated."

Everyone sat.

"The problem with history," Hatch said softly, "is that it's written by the victors. It's a shame. Had Hitler won the war, as he nearly did, he'd be as beloved today as George Washington is in America. Or was. So there is a lesson for us in Hitler's failure." His gaze panned the room, stopping briefly on each member. Then he leaned forward and said only slightly above a whisper, "*Don't lose.*"

A nervous laughter went up around the table. Hatch smiled. "Go ahead and laugh," he said. "It's funny." Hatch was in a rare, jovial mood brought on by the success of their recent conquest. "So here we are,"

Hatch said. "About to rewrite the Tuvaluan history. Now that we have a land base, we can move forward with greater efficiency."

He pushed a button, and an image of the cluster of nine Tuvaluan islands appeared on a large screen behind him.

"The Hatch Islands are comprised of four reef islands and five atolls. Their current names are nothing more than worthless remnants of a dying language, meaningless and, as Quentin will attest, nearly unpronounceable."

Quentin blushed. There was more laughter.

"Henceforth I will bestow upon each island a new name, one derived from Greek mythology, to match our purpose.

"Funafuti will remain the capital of the Hatch Islands and shall be named after Nike, the goddess of victory.

"Nanumea, our northernmost atoll, will be called Hephaestus, after the god of fire and blacksmiths. This is where we will manufacture the equipment for our Starxource plants.

"Niutao will be named Hades, after the god of the underworld, and so it will be considered by its non-Elgen inhabitants. It will be our prison and work camp and source of GPs.

"Nanumaga will henceforth be known as Demeter, after the goddess of agriculture. This is where we shall raise livestock and where the bulk of our agricultural production will take place.

"Nukufetau, the island closest to Nike, will be called Plutus, after the god of wealth. This is where we shall build our bullion and currency depository and, in the meantime, dock the *Joule*. This construction is of utmost importance, and I will address it shortly.

"Vaitupu will be called Ares, after the god of war. This is where our warships will dock and our forces will be trained. It is close to Plutus, so it will be easy to staff and guard the depository.

"Nui, the centermost atoll, will be named Athena, after the goddess of wisdom, war, and useful arts. It is where the *Volta*, our science ship, will be docked, and where we shall build our laboratories and, eventually, perfect the MEI.

"Nukulaelae will be called Dionysus, the god of wine. This is where we will grow our vineyards and build, for the Elgen elite, our luxury retreat. Only the most beautiful of the Tuvaluan natives will be stationed here to serve the Elgen.

"Niulakita, our southernmost island, will be called Poseidon, after the god of the sea. This is where we will establish our fishing port,

providing food for the Elgen guards and our rats in the Starxource plant.”

Hatch turned back to his audience. “This, Elgen, represents our new temporary home. Effective immediately, these new names will be adopted by all Elgen and will be taught to the natives in the Hatch Islands schools. I have had maps printed to help you familiarize yourselves with these islands and their names.”

Hatch’s two guards began handing out maps to those at the table.

“Next, I present the architectural drawings of our bullion depository.” A picture of a massive ten-story stone-and-concrete structure appeared on the screen. It resembled the Fort Knox depository in America.

“The architects of this impressive structure have, of course, been imprisoned. And, as with the pharaohs of old, once our building is complete, they will be executed along with the inner workers of the facility, so that no one will ever know its secrets.

“This vault will be more secure than Fort Knox, and someday it will hold more gold than Fort Knox ever could. Needless to say, this building is of utmost importance, which is why we will break ground on it tomorrow. But there are priorities of equal importance.

“From the beginning, our goal has been to take over the world’s electric power supply. We’ve made tremendous progress. We are currently producing three billion kilowatt hours annually, providing thirteen percent of the electricity currently being created in the world. A lesser man might be pleased with this accomplishment. But, as you well know, I am not a lesser man. My objective is to be producing more than half the world’s electricity within thirty-six months.

“Unfortunately, we’ve hit a few snags. The attacks by the resistance and the Vey terrorists have slowed our progress some. I am pleased to announce that they will not be a thorn in our side any longer. The resistance has been annihilated.”

The group broke out in applause.

Hatch held up his hand and continued. “It is just a matter of time before we have captured and executed Vey and his terrorists, but in the meantime, without the help of the resistance, they are impotent. The boy doesn’t even have a driver’s license.”

Again there was laughter.

“But that does not mean that we don’t still have great obstacles to surmount. Our greatest challenge is the nature of global politics itself. The largest countries in the world, the U.S., Russia, China, and India,

have continued to keep us out. As shortsighted as the nations often are with their energy production, they are wise enough to realize that once we have complete control of their electrical power, we have control of them.

“For some time I have puzzled on how to overcome this challenge. I am pleased to announce that I have found a solution. We’ve been going about this all wrong. We have been relying on politicians, presidents, and prime ministers to invite us into their countries. Simply put, we’ve been talking to the wrong people. Big government is so inefficient and run by such myopic factions that any real company so run would soon go out of business. It is time we bypass the bureaucracy and go straight to the end consumers. Today I am pleased to present our newest initiative, the Nova Starxource Pod.”

Hatch pushed a button on his remote, and the screen displayed the picture of a sleek white structure about the size of a suburban garage. The corners were slightly rounded, and the top rose in a dome. The walls were bright white, with the appearance of plastic. On one side, fastened to the circular construction, was a large control panel with gauges, lights, and LED screens.

“Starting today, the construction of massive Starxource plants will no longer be our primary focus. Our new focus is the corporation, whom we will reach by building sleeker, miniature versions of our Starxource plants—power sources just large enough to power a large hotel or business, even a condominium complex.

“Initially, for those who opt in to our system, power will cost, on average, just twenty-nine percent of what they are currently paying. Once the unit is paid off, which will take the average business owner about three years, the price will drop to eleven percent.

“As we unveil our new system, we will launch a half-billion-dollar advertising campaign extolling its virtues. This is one such ad designed to play during the Super Bowl.” An advertisement began playing on the screen. A beautiful, intelligent-looking woman was sitting next to a replica of Thomas Edison’s original lightbulb.

In 1879, Thomas Alva Edison invented the electric lightbulb, bringing illumination to a dark world. Today, Elgen Incorporated presents the biggest breakthrough in electricity since the lightbulb: the Nova Starxource Pod. Propelled by organic fuel with zero emissions, the Nova Starxource Pod is capable of producing clean, electric energy at less than twenty percent of what you're paying now. That's an eighty

percent savings and one hundred percent clean energy. So what are you waiting for? Save money, save the environment, save the world. Contact Elgen today for a free demonstration. Let's keep America shining from sea to sea.

Everyone clapped at the commercial's conclusion.

Hatch continued. "Concurrent with our campaign, we will fund major conservation groups and lobbies to oppose all our competition—to fight offshore drilling and the creation of nuclear power plants and nuclear dumps, as well as additional coal mining sites.

"This will raise the price of energy for everyone else, making our alternative even more appealing. Then, as more and more consumers leave the grid for our Nova systems, the average cost of traditional energy per person will increase, making our alternative still more appealing. Eventually our energy will become so inexpensive, and theirs so expensive, that we will control ninety-eight percent of the commercial and residential market."

EGG Despain raised his hand. "Once we've spread our mini-plants, how do we still make money?"

"By providing fuel, of course. Our special Rabisk."

". . . But what if people just start feeding the rats their own food?"

Hatch looked at Despain as if he were an idiot. "They won't know that our Nova plants contain rats. The units are completely self-contained, and the new Rabisk has been liquefied and looks like oil, which we've named Petrox.

"The consumer just inserts a canister, and the pod time-feeds the rats. If the proper canister isn't used, the rats die and the energy fails. As part of their contract, they will be fined a substantial amount for repairs."

"What if someone tries to take apart the pod?" EGG Bosen asked.

"Of course someone will try. The Nova Pod is marked with warning labels and double-secured with an intrusion trigger. The interior pod is lined with magnesium panels that will reach heat in excess of two thousand degrees if the pod is tampered with. Once opened, they will find nothing inside but ashes."

"This is brilliant," EGG Bosen said, clapping. Everyone else began clapping as well.

"Thank you," Hatch said.

EGG Grant raised his hand. "Sir, how can we be sure that corporate America will buy into our process?"

“Are you a fool or an idiot?” Hatch asked.

The EGG didn't answer.

“I asked you a question.”

“I hope neither, sir.”

“Then quit asking foolish, idiotic questions. Of course they will buy into our process. What part of capitalism do you not understand?”

Grant shrank with embarrassment.

“What we are doing is creating an unfair competitive advantage. Let me explain this so a five-year-old could understand. We have two bread companies, Bakery A and Bakery B. They both bake bread. They both have the same basic expenses: material, labor, and energy prices. So the cost of their bread is roughly the same.

“But let's say that Bakery A installs a Nova Pod system. Their energy cost is now eighty-seven percent less than Bakery B. They can now produce bread for less money and make more profit.

“Bakery B is now in trouble. In order to compete with Bakery A, they have no choice but to come to us. Our success will fuel our success. And this ball will roll down the mountain until it covers the world.” Hatch paused for emphasis. “Elgen, this is our path and our destination. This is the day of our glory. In the words of the great Russian leader Stalin, ‘the capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them.’”

The room broke into wild applause.



After the meeting concluded, all the attendees went up to congratulate Hatch. Quentin and EGG Daines were the last to leave.

“Brilliant, sir,” Quentin said. “Just brilliant.”

“Thank you, Quentin,” Hatch said, then added, “*King* Quentin. How are things progressing in your kingdom?”

“Well,” he said. “We’ve started the remodeling of the palace, the construction of a stadium, and the new educational curriculum is complete and is being taught in the schools.”

“Excellent,” Hatch said. “Keep me informed of the progress.” He turned toward his EGG. “I’m tired, Daines. What do you need?”

“A moment of your time, sir.”

Hatch frowned. “Is it important?”

“Vitaly,” Daines said.

Hatch nodded. “All right. Proceed.”

Daines glanced at Quentin, then said, “In private, sir.”

“You’re sure it can’t wait?”

“It’s best that it doesn’t, sir,” Daines said. The EGG was known to be a man of few words but much violence and action.

Hatch sighed. “Very well. We’ll meet in my office.” Hatch turned to Quentin. “Carry on.”

"Yes, sir," Quentin said, walking off.

Hatch led Daines down the corridor to his private office. Once they were inside, Hatch asked, "What is it?"

"We've discovered video of criminal Welch leaving the ship, sir. He was, as we suspected, accompanied by the two guards, Hill and Rawlings."

"As we suspected," Hatch said. "Was Welch wearing some kind of disguise?"

"No, sir."

"And no one questioned them?"

"No, sir. They exited the boat through the aft loading dock."

"The place was swimming with guards," Hatch said angrily. "Someone must have noticed."

"The whole escape was very peculiar. No one they passed showed the least amount of interest in them."

"That is peculiar," Hatch said, rubbing his chin. "Very peculiar."

"There's more, sir."

"More?"

"They were not alone."

Hatch's eyes narrowed. "It was a conspiracy?"

"Yes, sir," the EGG said. "Three of the electric youths were with them."

"Which ones?"

"Quentin, Torstyn, and Tara."

Hatch's face turned beet red. "What were they doing?"

"They were walking behind him."

"How closely?"

"Within ten meters."

Hatch clenched his jaw. "That explains why no one paid attention. Tara must have made him look like someone else. Probably a Taiwanese."

"That's a possibility, sir."

"It's not a possibility," Hatch shouted, slamming his fist onto his desk. "It's what happened." Hatch began to shake with anger. "I made him a king, and he repays me with betrayal? He will pay for this. They will all pay."

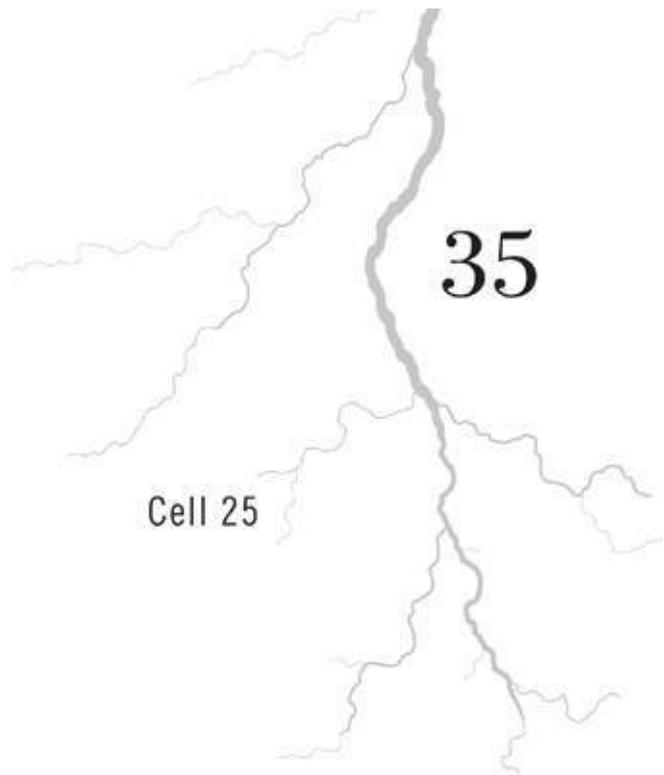
"What are your orders, sir?"

Hatch carefully thought over the situation. "We must proceed cautiously. Especially with Torstyn. He's very dangerous and loyal to

Quentin. I want you to arrest all of the youths in their sleep, RESAT them, and then isolate them from one another.”

“What of the two not involved?”

“All of them. The other two must have at least known what was going on. Instruct the guards to use the new RAVE to apprehend them and lock them separately in T block. But leave Quentin to me.”



It was three in the morning and Quentin was fast asleep when Hatch opened his door and turned on the light. “Wake up, Quentin.”

It took Quentin a moment to get oriented. He shielded his eyes from the garish light. “Dr. Hatch . . . what are you doing here?”

Hatch looked around the messy room, then walked to the side of Quentin’s bed. “I think you know what would bring me to your room at three in the morning.”

Quentin sat up. “No, sir.”

Hatch sighed a little. “No, I didn’t think you would be eager to confess your crime.” He sat on the side of Quentin’s bed. “So if you are insistent on playing this little game, I’ll oblige you. I know what you did, Quentin. Unfortunately, Tara’s powers don’t work through video.”

“I don’t follow, sir,” Quentin said.

“Of course you do. You know exactly what I’m talking about. I trusted you. I made you a king, and you betrayed me.”

Quentin stared into Hatch’s eyes for a moment, then shouted, “Guards!”

An amused grin crossed Hatch’s face. “How optimistic of you. And pathetic. You actually thought that your guards would be loyal to you in the face of certain death? No, no one will be coming to your aid.” His

eyes narrowed. "I've taught you thousands of lessons, and now you have taught me one. There is no loyalty. Not even between us. You've shown me that."

"Sir, I don't know what you're—"

Hatch slapped Quentin hard enough to knock him back into his bed. A thin stream of blood dripped from his nose. "Quit lying to me! Tell me the truth. Tell me that you escorted Welch off the ship. Tell me now!"

Quentin held a hand to his stinging face. He was shaking with fear. "Yes. I saved him. He was like a father to me."

Hatch stood, then grabbed Quentin by the foot and dragged him off the bed. Then he kicked him while Quentin tried to protect himself from the blows. "*I am your father,*" Hatch shouted. "And your king. And you turned on me. Your betrayal is worse than Welch's. And so your punishment will be worse as well."

Quentin coughed up blood. "How could it possibly be worse?" he said bitterly.

"You should know better than that by now. Things can always be worse."

Quentin, still on his back, feebly raised his hand to put out the power, but nothing happened.

Hatch shook his head. "And to think I had so much hope for you. Foolish, stupid boy. You didn't think I would be prepared for that? We have a new invention just for you. That slight headache you feel . . . that's me. The RESAT darts were too cumbersome. Too unreliable. So we invented this." Hatch brought out a small hand remote about the size of a bar of soap. "The scientists who invented it named it the RESAT 2.0, but I renamed it the RAVE. It's a remarkable improvement. I just slightly turn the knob . . ."

Quentin screamed out in pain.

"Think of it as a handheld version of Nichelle. We created it based on her powers. Do you remember her? She's one of the losers you let escape." He turned the dial up more, and Quentin screamed out even louder.

"Please, stop. Please."

"You're begging for mercy? Wasn't it you who said whoever helped Welch is a traitor and deserves the same punishment? You, of all people, should know that there is no mercy for kings. Kings are on thrones or in graves. There are no exceptions."

"Then kill me," Quentin said.

“Quick death would fall under the category of mercy. An example must be made of you. We will build a special monkey cage just for you, and that is where you will spend the rest of your life.”

“Please. I’ll do whatever you want.”

“What I want is for you to not have betrayed me, but it’s too late for that. Bad eggs don’t get good again.” He turned back toward the door. “Guards.”

The room echoed with the clash of trooper boots on the marble floor as an Elgen patrol ran into the room, lining up at attention behind Hatch.

“Captain, take Quentin to cellblock T. Keep your RAVEs on six. I don’t want him damaging any of the electronics on the way in.”

Sweat dripped off Quentin’s face. “What about the others?” he asked. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Your immediate accomplices have already been arrested and are awaiting their punishments. Bryan and Kylee have also been arrested until I can determine how much they knew.”

“They didn’t know anything.”

“I’ll determine that. As far as Torstyn and Tara, I haven’t yet decided what their fates will be, but rest assured their punishments will be commensurate with the crime they committed. Treason is always punishable by death. It’s the going rate. The only question is, how long and how painful will that death be?” He turned back to the captain. “Take him.”

The guards quickly surrounded Quentin. They rolled him onto his stomach, secured his hands, then lifted him to his feet.

“Prisoner is secured,” the zone leader said to Hatch.

Hatch walked up to Quentin until their faces were six inches apart. “So, Quentin. How did it feel to be *good*? Was it worth it?”

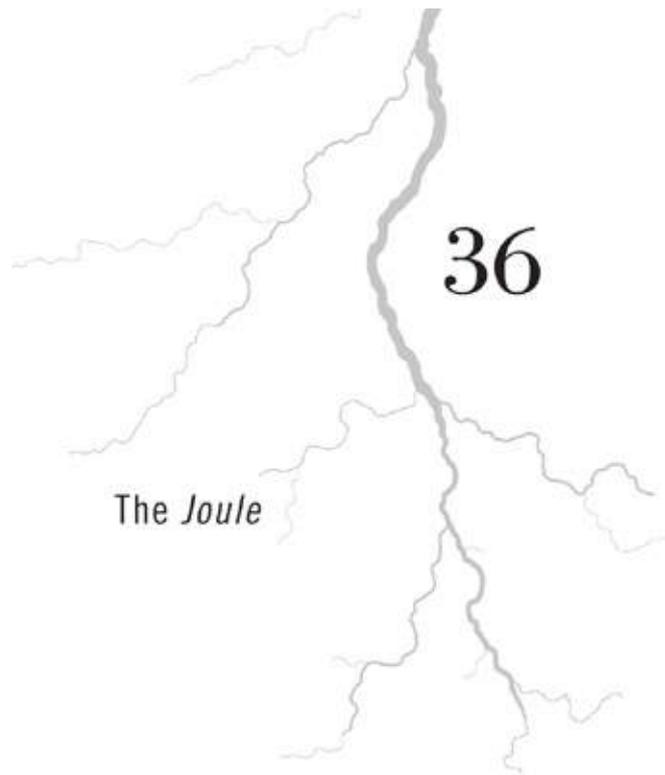
For a moment Quentin looked Hatch in the eye, then said, “I would do it again.”

Hatch slugged him in the stomach, and Quentin fell to his knees, gasping.

“Get him out of here,” Hatch said. “Lock him in Cell 25.”



PART THIRTEEN



The next few weeks at the ranch were the most peaceful we'd had in months. It was nice to have nothing to do. I mean, we helped out with chores and stuff; I even helped harvest honey, but there really wasn't that much they needed help with.

We played a lot. There was a sand volleyball pit down near the pond, which everyone spent a lot of time at. Even Ostin. What a sight that was. Ostin played volleyball about as well as I did advanced calculus. Bad, but entertaining to watch.

It was about two weeks after our return from Idaho when Taylor and I went on a hike in the nearby mountains. We had just started climbing the first small hill when I asked, "How are your parents doing?"

Taylor shrugged. "Not so well," she said. "My dad's still freaked. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a nervous breakdown."

"I'm not surprised. He just lost his job, his home, and everything he thought he knew about the world. I'd be freaked too." I put my hands into my pockets. "Actually, I *am* freaked."

Taylor was quiet a moment, then stopped walking. She turned to me. "Michael, what if this is it?"

"What do you mean?"

“What if this is as good as it gets? Seeing that marquee at Meridian High for cheerleader tryouts . . .” She shook her head. “Everything’s just moving on without us. I feel like I’ve been waiting for everything to be good again so I could be happy. But what if that day never comes?”

“It will come,” I said. “The Elgen can’t last forever.”

She frowned. “Yes, they can. And they might. Good doesn’t always win.” Her eyes began to well up. “Why is it that good always has to fight an uphill battle?”

I thought for a moment, then said, “I don’t know. Maybe that’s the point. Good things are higher up.”

She began to cry. “I’m tired of fighting uphill. We almost died on the *Ampere*. And for what? To slow them down?”

I put my arms around her as she started to sob. When she could speak, she said, “I’m just tired of being afraid.”

I slowly rubbed her back. “Me too,” I said softly. “Me too.”

Just then we heard the ringing of the dinner bell.

I glanced down at my watch. “I wonder what that is. It’s not time to eat.”

Taylor wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. “Something must be going on. We better go back.”

* * *

We hiked back down to the dirt road and had been walking for about ten minutes when Jack drove up on an ATV. “Hey, everyone’s waiting for you two.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“The chairman called a meeting in the main house. They sent me to get you. Hop on.”

Jack drove us back to the house. When we got there, the main room was crowded. Not surprisingly, the three of us were the last to arrive. The feeling in the room was tense and uncomfortable. The chairman walked to the front of the room.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” he said. “I called this meeting because we’ve been contacted by the voice.” He paused, looking at us. “Things are in motion. Big things.”

I wondered what he was talking about.

“I suppose it’s a good time to be an Elgen, if there is such a thing. The Elgen have overthrown the island nation of Tuvalu and established a base. In the last year their force has tripled in size to more than six

thousand soldier-guards, and they have doubled their planned Starxsource plants.

“But that is not why I called this meeting. An opportunity has presented itself that could allow us to destroy Dr. Hatch and the Elgen once and for all.”

We all sat up at attention.

“Their electric youths have rebelled. Hatch has sentenced their leader, Quentin, to lifetime incarceration in a monkey cage.”

“Where he belongs,” Jack whispered to me.

“Tara and Torstyn have been sentenced to death. Kylee has also been imprisoned. Only Bryan remains free. They believe that he is the last loyal electric youth.”

“That’s only because he’s too dumb to rebel,” Nichelle mumbled.

The chairman looked at us for a moment, then said, “They could be invaluable allies. Not only because of their gifts, but because of their knowledge of Hatch’s plans and how he thinks.”

He was quiet again as he looked over at me. I suddenly had the sinking feeling that he was going to say something I wasn’t going to like.

“The entire Elgen fleet is docked at Tuvalu. One of those boats is the *Joule*. For those not familiar with the Elgen fleet, the *Joule* is their most unusual and secretive boat. In fact, it’s not only the fastest in the fleet, but it’s part submarine. It can submerge to nearly a thousand feet. It is also the most valuable boat in the fleet. It is a floating Fort Knox. It holds billions of dollars of gold bullion, foreign currencies, and diamonds.”

“Why don’t they just put their money in banks?” I asked.

“They do, but only five percent. The rest they physically cache. Hatch is paranoid by nature, but especially of banks. And for good reason. If you’re declaring war on the world, someone is eventually going to freeze your assets. He’s not going to allow that. The voice tells us that right now there is currently more than nine billion dollars on board the *Joule*.

“We’ve also learned that the treasure won’t be there for long. One of the reasons the Elgen overthrew Tuvalu was to build a secure facility for their treasure. Their own Fort Knox.” He took a deep breath. “Wars aren’t won with guns; they’re won with checkbooks. Without that money, the Elgen can’t support their growth in troops. At least for now. Nine billion dollars is enough money for us to turn it on the Elgen and shut them down. That is, if we can find the *Joule* and hijack it.”

“How are we going to do that?” I asked.

“We have some help in locating it. But boarding it is going to be . . . challenging. If the *Joule*’s captain suspects danger, he simply submerges the vessel. The *Joule* can stay underwater for up to six months.”

“That’s bad news,” Jack said.

“That’s bad news and good news,” the chairman said. “Because once we get on board, the other boats in the fleet won’t be able to touch us. So getting onto the boat is the challenge. The only non-crew allowed on the *Joule* is Hatch. And even he has to use a secret code.”

“Hatch isn’t going to escort us on board,” Zeus said.

“And he’s not going to give us the secret code,” Tessa said. “Even if we ask nicely.”

“No. But Taylor can get it out of his mind.”

“If I touch him,” she said, looking as disgusted as fearful.

“And one of his youths, Tara, can make someone look like Hatch. With their help, we could steal the boat.”

“How is Tara going to help us?” Ostin asked. “She’s going to be executed.”

“We’ll have to save her.”

“You’re saying that you want us to rescue our enemy?” I asked.

The chairman nodded. “Remember, they are now Hatch’s enemy.”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Ostin said.

“Exactly,” the chairman said.

“Let me get this straight,” Zeus said. “You want us to get onto the island undetected and rescue the Glows—who tried to kill us—from the most secure Starxsource facility the Elgen have. Then hijack their most protected boat?”

The chairman nodded. “Basically, yes.”

“That’s basically insane,” Zeus replied.

The chairman frowned. “Yes, it is. Which is why they won’t be expecting it. And, God willing, if it works, the war is turned.”

The room went silent. I looked around at the Electroclan, only to find that they were all looking at me, most with fear in their eyes. I put my head in my hands to think. This was likely a suicide mission. The odds of some, or all, of us being killed were high. But that was true too if we did nothing to stop the Elgen. This was what our resistance was all about. Up until this point, we had been chopping at the leaves of the Elgen tree, trying to bring it down. This might be our only chance to pull it up by the roots. *And who else was there to do it? Who was more qualified than the Electroclan?*

I looked at my mother. She was looking at me, her eyes fearful. Joel was holding her. Ostin's mother was dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

I looked back up at the chairman. "Zeus was right. What you're asking of us is insane. It's more than all of our other missions combined. But, all things considered, what choice do we have?" I looked around again at my friends. Taylor took my hand. I took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. "When do we go?"



PART FOURTEEN



June 27 (about six weeks earlier) Geneva, Switzerland

Giacomo Schema very nearly knocked a half dozen people over as he frantically ran out the front door of the Bank of Geneva. Once outside he froze in the middle of the crowded sidewalk while other people, people who didn't have a price on their heads, passed him from both directions. He had no idea where he was running to. The direction he chose could mean the difference between life and death, but since he had no way of knowing which was which, his survival was no more than a toss of a coin.

At the moment, there were no Elgen in sight, which Schema knew didn't mean anything. He knew better than anyone that just because you didn't see the Elgen guards, it didn't mean they weren't there. Or, at least, watching. This he had learned the hard way.

He had only a few hundred euro in his coat pocket, and his credit cards were now worthless. They were worse than worthless; they were dangerous. Using them would lead the Elgen right to him.

He'd started running in the direction of the traffic, when a car honked. A black Mercedes pulled up to the curb, and the passenger-side

window lowered, revealing the driver. It was the same driver who had picked him up from the airport and brought him to the meeting.

"Mr. Schema!" the driver shouted through the window. "Do you need a ride?"

"Yes!" Schema shouted back. He jumped into the front seat of the car, then shouted, "Go, go, go!"

"Yes, sir." The driver pulled out into the heavy traffic.

Schema took his phone from his coat pocket and threw it out the window.

The driver watched curiously. "Is something wrong?"

"Something is *very* wrong."

"Shall I take you back to the Geneva hotel?"

"No, they'll be waiting for me. I need to get out of the country." Schema turned and looked out the window. "Take Route de Malagnou south to E712 to E25."

"And where are we going, sir?"

"Turin."

"Italy, sir?"

"Yes. It's about two hundred fifty kilometers from here. How fast can you get there?"

"If I drive fast, we can be there in three hours."

"Then drive fast. Don't stop for anything."

"Yes, sir."

The driver's cell phone rang. As he reached for it, Schema said, "Don't answer it."

"But it's my boss."

"We can't take chances. I'll see that you are well rewarded for your service."

"As you wish," the driver said.

Once they were out of the city, Schema started to relax. As far as he could tell, no one was following them. For the moment, at least, he was safe.

"Do you have children?" he asked the driver.

"Children? No, sir. Do you?"

"Three. And a grandson. I was married a long time ago. I haven't seen any of them for many years."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir. They must miss you."

Schema looked out the window. "I don't think they miss me."

The driver glanced over. "I'm sorry to hear that, too."

* * *

A half hour later, as the car sped along the autobahn into the countryside, the vehicle started to lurch.

“What’s happening?” Schema asked.

“I don’t know,” the driver said. “A malfunction.”

“Are you out of petrol?”

“No, sir. I’m sure it’s nothing. I just need to get off the autobahn. I’ll only be a minute.” The driver took the next exit into the small town of Cluses, France. He pulled the car off the road onto a gravel strip and stopped. He got out and lifted the hood, then got back inside. “It might be a while.”

“We can’t wait here,” Schema said. “They might be following. We need to get another car. We need to get out of here.”

The driver suddenly pulled out a gun, leveling it at Schema’s chest. “No, Schema. This is as far as you go.”

“Are you mad? What are you doing?”

“This is where I’m meeting my associates to pick you up. As you know, Admiral-General Hatch offered a reward for you, dead or alive. It’s more if you’re alive, but if you’re trouble, I’m not greedy. A million dollars is still plenty to share. Now put your hands behind your head.”

Schema shuddered. “Whatever Hatch is offering, I’ll double it.”

“You have nothing to double it with,” he said. “I know what has happened. You’re penniless.”

“That will change.”

“Perhaps,” the driver said. “Perhaps. The Americans have a saying—a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. You’re in hand.”

“I’m offering you more money than you can comprehend. I’ll give you ten million euro if you help me escape.”

The driver just smiled. “Admiral-General Hatch has signed your death warrant. Your life isn’t worth fifty cents. But your body’s worth at least a million dollars. And should I betray him, there will be a bounty on my head. Then we’ll both be dead.”

“There’s got to be something we can negotiate.”

“No, sir. I have completed my negotiations. Now put your forehead against the dashboard and keep your hands where I can see them.”

Just then a dark blue van pulled off the exit and stopped beside them.

Schema panicked. “Please,” he said. “I’ll give you whatever you want. Tell your friends I’ll make you all wealthy beyond your wildest dreams. I just need time.”

"These aren't my people," the driver said, looking suddenly anxious.

A teenage girl got out of the car and walked toward the driver. She was pretty, with cropped blond hair.

He lowered his gun. "If you say anything, I'll shoot you."

"Excusez-moi, monsieur. Parlez-vous anglais?"

"Yes, miss," the driver said. "I speak English."

"Thank goodness," she said, smiling. "My French sucks." She looked at them curiously. "Are you having car troubles?"

"We are fine, thank you. The auto club is on its way. What do you need?"

"Unfortunately, we seem to be a little lost. Is this the right road for Milan?"

"For a little way more. You need to get back on the highway; then you must go east at Ivrea."

"Ivrea?"

"Yes. It is about one hundred sixty kilometers."

"Thank you very much. *Merci.*" She started to turn away, then turned back. "I'm sorry, just one more question."

"Yes, miss," the driver said, trying to hide his annoyance.

"What were you planning to do with Chairman Schema?"

Suddenly the driver felt his muscles tense up and freeze. He was completely paralyzed. He looked at the young woman fearfully. "What are you doing to me?"

She smiled. "It's just a little something I do." She turned back to the van and shouted, "Come on, boys. Let's get this done."

Two large men climbed out of the vehicle and walked toward the Mercedes. Both men were muscular; the driver was tall and the other stout. The shorter of the two took the gun from the driver, then took his phone, opened it, removed the battery, and tossed it into the bushes.

"Take Schema," the girl said.

The other man opened the passenger-side door. Schema, who was also paralyzed, watched in fear. "Who are you?" he asked the young woman.

"My name is Cassy," she said.

"How much do you want?"

Her delicate brow fell. "How much of what do I want?"

"Money."

Cassy laughed. "Seriously, you're trying to bribe me? You're confused."

“Are you Elgen?”

“No. Are you?”

Schema hesitated. “I used to be.”

“So I’ve heard.”

The two men lifted Schema and carried him over to their van, then dropped him in the back. Cassy reached out and took Schema’s wallet.

“What are you doing with that?” Schema asked.

“You won’t need it anymore. You no longer exist.”

Cassy, followed by the shorter man, walked back over to the car and tossed the wallet inside the car next to the driver. Then the man lay a stainless-steel metal canister in the backseat of the Mercedes.

“What is that?” the driver asked. “What did you put back there?”

“Don’t worry yourself with that,” Cassy said. “In fact, all of your worries will soon be over. *Au revoir*.” She looked at him. “No, wait, it’s *adieu*. We won’t be seeing you again. I told you my French sucks.” She walked back to the van. “Let’s get out of here.”

The driver of the Mercedes cursed as the van drove away. Fortunately, his paralysis was slowly wearing off, and he could start to move his fingers, then his hands. “Finally,” he said, lifting himself up. He looked out to make sure the van was really gone; then he heard a sharp click.

“*Qu’est-ce . . .*”

The metal canister exploded, blowing the car to oblivion.



“You said your name was Cassy, but who are you really?” Schema asked again.

“I told you,” Cassy said, slipping a dark sack over his head.

“Who are you with?”

“I’m with you.” She laughed. “Sorry, just messing with you. We’re with the resistance.”

“The resistance,” Schema said slowly. “You mean Michael Vey?”

“You know Michael Vey?”

“We’ve met.”

“Then you have one on me. I haven’t met him yet. But I’m looking forward to it someday. In the electric human world, he’s a rock star. I hear he can deflect bullets.”

“You’re part of the same organization.”

“Not really. Michael’s not really a company man, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t,” Schema said bluntly. “Could you please free me? I have an itch.”

“For a minute. But don’t touch your hood. And if you try anything to get away, I’ll not only paralyze your body, I’ll paralyze your lungs and let you suffocate.”

"I won't try anything," Schema said.

"Good decision," she said.

Schema groaned out as she released her power. Cassy watched him carefully, then said, "So, like I was saying, Michael's like a free agent, you know? We don't control him or his friends. They're helping us, I assume, because it's the right thing to do. Or maybe because he doesn't like you. Either way he's on our side. And that's a good thing."

Schema was quiet a moment. "He doesn't like me, or he doesn't like the Elgen?"

Cassy shrugged. "Is there a difference?"

"There's a big difference."

"Anyway, he freed you from the *Ampere*, so it must not be you."

"Is this hood really necessary?"

"Yes, it is," Cassy said. "So, you got me thinking. You're kind of like Dr. Frankenstein, aren't you? You created a monster, and it turned on you."

"It wasn't my creation that turned on me. It was Hatch."

"Weren't you Hatch's boss?"

"Yes," he said reluctantly.

"My point."

Just then a phone rang, and the man in the passenger seat answered.

"Yes, we have him. Yes, sir. We'll be there." He put the phone back into his pocket and turned to Cassy. "He wants us to bring Schema directly to him."

Cassy turned back to Schema. "This is your lucky day," she said. "He rarely, rarely sees anyone. And you're about to meet him."

Schema swallowed with fear. "Who are you talking about?"

"Our leader," Cassy said. "We just call him the voice."



The van arrived in the Italian town of Turin in less than ninety minutes. They drove to a small, private airstrip, boarded a private jet, and flew for two hours. Schema wore the hood the entire way.

“Why can’t I take this off?” he asked.

“Quit whining,” Cassy said. “You’re a smart guy. You look out the window, you might recognize where we are going. You don’t get it off until we reach our final destination, so get comfortable.”

The plane landed on a small, seaside airstrip, where they were met by a new driver and vehicle. Then again they drove, this time for nearly two hours, through remote countryside until the car stopped at a mountain gate, where they were met by two guards dressed in camouflage. Both guards were carrying UZIs that were pointed at the driver as they pulled up.

“ID,” the guard said tersely.

Even though the driver and the guard knew each other well, they didn’t show it. The driver handed him an identification card. The guard examined it closely, then asked, “How were the roads in today?”

“It’s always beautiful driving through the vineyards,” the driver said.

The guard handed the driver back his card. The question was strictly protocol, and there were seven possible answers. Had the driver been

under some kind of duress, his answer would have changed specific to his situation, including, "We got stuck behind an oxcart," at which point the guard would have triggered a remote switch that would have blown up the car and its occupants.

"Can you remove the hood?" Schema asked.

"Still no," Cassy replied.

"Where are we?"

"Our destination," Cassy said.

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"I could, but then I'd have to kill you."

The car pulled forward through the gate and up a long, tree-lined road. The trees were close together, and their branches reached across the passage, creating a long, arched tunnel. Finally the car drove up to another entrance, where a guard had already opened a gate and now waved them on through.

The road changed to cobblestone for the last fifty meters as they drove up to a beautiful French-style château. The mansion was large and had once been beautiful but was not well-kept, as weeds grew up between the black cobblestone drive and around the property. The surrounding forest seemed to be growing toward the structure, like a slow wave of foliage crashing over the architecture.

The driver pulled the car into an open garage, then closed the door behind them, leaving them in complete darkness. Then a light came on. Cassy turned back toward Schema.

"All right, we can take it off now." She pulled off Schema's hood. Schema now looked confused and somewhat subdued.

"Are you going to kill me?" he asked.

"That depends," Cassy said.

"On what?"

"On whether or not you do anything to get yourself killed. We didn't go to all this trouble to bring you here just to execute you. If we wanted you dead, I could have done that in France without even getting out of the car. I went to rescue you."

"Thank you," he said.

"I was wondering when you were going to get around to thanking me for saving your life," Cassy said. "But we didn't do it for you. We did it because the voice wants to speak with you face-to-face." She shook her head. "I still can't believe he is going to let you see him. And before you ask, you are at the headquarters of the resistance. That is all you will ever be told and is all you need to know. Not even our leaders in

America know where we are. We intend to keep it that way. If you try to escape, you will be killed. We have no choice. There are just too many lives at risk.”

“I understand,” Schema said.

“Good. Now follow me.”

She got out of the car, then opened the vehicle’s door so Schema could get out. As he stepped out onto the cement floor, he suddenly froze, unable to breathe. For nearly a minute he grasped at his throat; then he fell to his knees, then to his side, unable to even make a sound, his panicked, questioning eyes locked on Cassy’s. When he was just about to pass out, Cassy released him. Schema loudly gasped for breath, coughing and wheezing. After a moment he got back onto his hands and knees, then looked up at her. “Why did you do that?”

“In case you were feeling bold, I wanted you to know just how easy it is for me to kill you. I don’t even need to be with you. I can smell your electrical makeup, which means I not only can feel you a mile away, I can reach you a mile away. This time I paralyzed your lungs. If you disappear from my sight, even for a minute, I will stop your heart. Those are my orders, and make no mistake, I will do as I’ve been ordered. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She smiled at the driver, who stood at attention next to the car. “He called me ‘ma’am.’”

* * *

Cassy and Schema, followed by the three guards, walked briskly into the mansion. They entered into a foyer, climbed a circular staircase, and then walked down a long, dark corridor with polished parquet floors. Surveillance cameras watched them from every corner. The hallway was adorned on both sides with dozens of antlers from deer, elk, and moose.

For most visitors allowed this far into the house, the guards’ guns would have been drawn, but since Cassy was with them, there was no need. Her power was instantaneous and much more potent than all of them combined. In a fight, she had never lost. Never.

Near the end of the hallway was a single solid mahogany door with an armed guard standing in front of it.

“Hiya, Cal,” Cassy said as she approached. “How’s your day?”

“Same old, same old,” he replied. “He’s been waiting for you.”

“I hope he’s been patient.”

"Yeah, right," Cal said with a half smile. He opened the door, then stepped aside for them to enter.

"This way, please," Cassy said to Schema. She led him into a large, classically decorated reception area. The walls were wood-paneled, and where there weren't bookshelves, the walls were covered with beautiful still-life oil paintings. The floor was also wood, though mostly concealed beneath an aged Persian rug. The ceiling was coffered and had two brass chandeliers hanging down, lighting the room in a gold-yellow hue.

Sitting at a burlled walnut desk in the center of the room was a fortysomething woman with bright red hair, wearing cat-eye glasses. She looked up at them as they entered.

"Howdy, Samantha," Cassy said.

"Welcome back, my dear," Samantha said in a formal British accent. "I see you brought us a guest."

"As commanded," she said.

"And how was your day?"

Cassy adopted a British accent. "I suppose I'm a bit *knackered*."

Samantha laughed. "You're so *cheeky*."

"Better cheeky than dodgy," Cassy said.

Samantha smiled. "He knows you're here. Please take a seat, he'll be right with you."

"Thank you," Cassy said. She led Schema to a leather couch, and they both sat down. Schema just looked around in anxious wonder. He might as well have had the hood on, as there was nothing to do as he waited. There were no magazines, no music playing.

The chime of a longcase clock sounded off in the corner of the room. He glanced again at the guards but quickly turned away since they just looked like they wanted to kill him.

After a moment, Schema asked the secretary, "Are you British?"

Samantha looked at him as if he'd just muttered some obscenity. Two of the guards stood, stepping before him.

"You will not speak," one of them said fiercely.

Schema quickly lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "Very sorry. I'll keep quiet."

Cassy relaxed back in her seat. About five minutes later there was a soft buzz from Samantha's phone. "He's ready for you," she said.

"Great," Cassy said, standing. "C'mon," she said to Schema. "We don't keep him waiting."

She crossed the room past Samantha's desk and opened the office door. She stepped inside ahead of Schema. The office looked and

smelled old, with the musty scent of antique leather books and wooden bookshelves, the intricate woodwork interspersed with technology. On the back wall there were five monitors playing the world news. The voice was turned away from Cassy and Schema, watching one of the channels.

“Please sit,” he said.

Cassy and Schema each sat in one of the leather chairs facing his desk. Then the voice turned around and looked at them. Schema audibly gasped when he saw the voice’s face.

“Giacomo Schema,” the voice said. “It’s good to see you again. Not a pleasure, mind you, but good. We have much work to do.”

Schema stared, speechless. When he could speak, he said, “Impossible. This is impossible. How could it be you?”

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SIMON PULSE / MERCURY INK

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

www.SimonandSchuster.com

First Simon Pulse/Mercury Ink hardcover edition September 2015

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Jacket designed by Jessica Handelman

Interior designed by Mike Rosamilia

The text of this book was set in Berling LT Std.

Library of Congress Control Number 2015947032

ISBN 978-1-4814-4410-1 (hc)

ISBN 978-1-4814-4412-5 (eBook)

MICHAEL VEY



FALL OF HADES

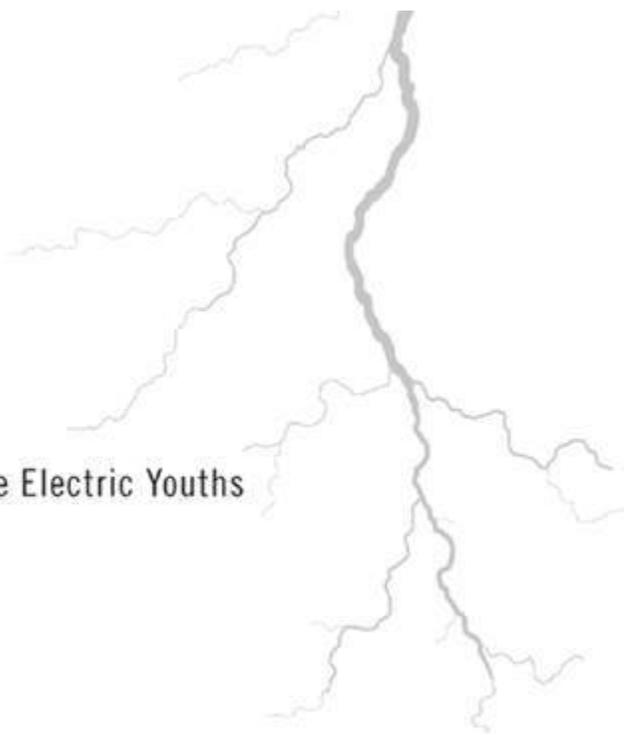
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RICHARD PAUL EVANS

To the Kyngs



Dossier: The Electric Youths

Michael Vey

Power: Ability to shock people through direct contact or conduction. Can also absorb other electric children's powers.

Michael is the most powerful of all the electric children and leader of the Electroclan. He is steadily increasing in power. He also has Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder that causes tics or other involuntary movements. Elgen scientists believe his Tourette's is somehow connected to his electricity.

Ostin Liss

Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Ostin is very intelligent, with an IQ of 155, which puts him at the same level as the average Nobel Prize winner. He is one of the original three members of the Electroclan and Michael's best friend.

Taylor Ridley

Power: Ability to temporarily scramble the electric synapses in the brain, causing confusion. She can also read people's minds, but only when touching them.

Taylor is one of the original three members of the Electroclan. She and Michael discovered each other's powers at Meridian High School, which they were both attending. She is Michael's girlfriend.

Abigail

Power: Ability to temporarily ease or stop pain by electrically stimulating certain parts of the brain. She must be touching the person to do so.

Along with Ian and McKenna, Abigail was held captive by the Elgen for many years because she refused to follow Hatch. She joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison, known as Purgatory.

Bryan

Power: The ability to create highly focused electricity that allows him to cut through objects, especially metal.

Bryan is one of Hatch's Glows. He spends most of his time playing video games and annoying Kylee.

Cassy

Power: Ability to electrically contract or "freeze" muscles from remarkable distances.

One of the most powerful of the electric children, Cassy is also the only one to be found by the resistance before the Elgen. She has lived with the voice since she was four years old. Her job, in addition to special missions and acting as the voice's bodyguard, is to keep track of the electric children. She is well versed on each of their powers and on the backgrounds of both the Glows and the Electroclan. She is a big fan of Michael Vey.

Grace

Power: Grace acts as a “human flash drive” and is able to transfer and store large amounts of electronic data.

Grace was living with the Elgen but joined the Electroclan when they defeated Hatch at the Elgen Academy. She has been working and living with the resistance but has not been on any missions with the Electroclan.

Ian

Power: Ability to see using electrolocation, which is the same way sharks and eels see through muddy or murky water.

Along with McKenna and Abigail, Ian was held captive by the Elgen for many years because he refused to follow Hatch. He joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison, known as Purgatory.

Jack

Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Jack spends a lot of time in the gym and is very strong. He is also excellent with cars. Originally one of Michael's bullies, he joined the Electroclan after Michael bribed him to help Michael rescue his mother from Dr. Hatch.

Kylee

Power: Born with the ability to create electromagnetic power, she is basically a human magnet.

One of Hatch's Glows, she spends most of her time shopping, along with her best (and only) friend, Tara.

McKenna

Power: Ability to create light and heat. She can heat herself to more than three thousand kelvins.

Along with Ian and Abigail, McKenna was held captive by the Elgen for many years because she refused to follow Hatch. She joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison, known as Purgatory.

Nichelle

Power: Nichelle acts as an electrical ground and can both detect and drain the powers of the other electric children. She can also, on a weaker level than Tessa, enhance the other children's powers.

Nichelle was Hatch's enforcer over the rest of the electric children until he abandoned her during the battle at the Elgen Academy. Although everyone was nervous about it, the Electroclan recruited her to join them on their mission to save Jade Dragon. She has become a loyal Electroclan member.

Quentin

Power: Ability to create isolated electromagnetic pulses, which lets him take out all electrical devices within twenty yards.

Quentin is smart and the leader of Hatch's Glows. He is regarded by the Elgen as second-in-command, just below Hatch.

Tanner

Power: Ability to interfere with the electrical navigation systems of aircraft and cause them to malfunction and crash. His powers are so advanced that he can do this from the ground.

After years of mistreatment by the Elgen, Tanner was rescued by the Electroclan from the Peruvian Starxource plant and has been staying with the resistance so he has a chance to recover. He carries deep emotional pain from the crimes Dr. Hatch forced him to commit.

Tara

Power: Tara's abilities are similar to her twin sister, Taylor's, in that she can disrupt normal electronic brain functions. Through years of training and refining her powers, Tara has learned to focus on specific parts of the brain in order to create emotions such as fear or joy.

Working with the Elgen scientists, she has learned how to create mental illusions, which, among other things, allows her to make people appear as someone or something else.

Tara is one of Hatch's Glows. She and Taylor were adopted by different families after they were born, and Tara has lived with Hatch and

the Elgen since she was six years old.

Tessa

Power: Tessa's abilities are the opposite of Nichelle's—she is able to enhance the powers of the other electric children.

Tessa escaped from the Elgen at the Starxource plant in Peru and lived in the Amazon jungle for six months with an indigenous tribe called the Amacarra. She joined the Electroclan after the tribe rescued Michael from the Elgen and brought them together.

Torstyn

Power: One of the more ruthless and lethal of the electric children, Torstyn can create microwaves.

Torstyn is one of Hatch's Glows and was instrumental to the Elgen in building the original Starxource plants. Although they were initially enemies, Torstyn is now loyal to Quentin and acts as his bodyguard.

Wade

Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Wade was Jack's best friend and joined the Electroclan at the same time he did. Wade died in Peru when the Electroclan was surprised by an Elgen guard.

Zeus

Power: Ability to “throw” electricity from his body.

Zeus was kidnapped by the Elgen as a young child and lived for many years as one of Hatch's Glows. He joined the Electroclan when they escaped from the Elgen Academy. His real name is Leonard Frank Smith.



PART ONE



When I was just eight years old, a few months after my father died, I was going through a box of his things when I found a wooden plaque engraved with these words:

Be ashamed to die until you have
won some victory for humanity.

—Horace Mann

At the time the plaque didn't mean much to me—other than that it had belonged to my father—but it must have meant *something* because I never forgot its message. Lately I've found myself thinking about it a lot. Maybe because it's now my reality. You could say that I'm fighting a battle for humanity. Of course I could die and not win any victory, but I think that's got to be worth something too.

I once heard a story that really bothered me. I don't know if it was true or not. I hope not. I don't even want to share it with you, it's that awful. But for the sake of my story I'm going to. It goes like this:

There was a man who was in charge of switching the railroad tracks for the train. It was an important job because if the train was on the wrong track, it could crash into another train, killing hundreds of people.

One evening, as he was about to switch the tracks for an oncoming train, he suddenly heard the cry of his young son, who had followed him out and was standing on the track he was supposed to switch the train to. This was the dilemma—if he switched the tracks, the train would kill his son. If he didn't, the people on the train, hundreds of strangers he didn't even know, might die.

At the last moment he switched the tracks. The people on the train went on by, not even knowing the disaster they had missed or the little boy who had been killed beneath them. The father went home carrying his son's broken body.

I hate that story, but it makes me think. I've wondered if, given the same situation, I would change the tracks or not. It's easy to act noble and say you would when you're not there, but what if it's someone you can't live without? What if it were Taylor standing on the tracks? Or Ostin? Or my mom?

That takes me back to my father's plaque about winning a victory for humanity. The war we're fighting against Dr. Hatch and the Elgen is one the world doesn't even know about. And just like the guy with the train, if we pull this off, no one on earth, not even you, will ever know how close they came to complete disaster or who was "killed beneath the train." Like Wade. Or maybe, in the end, all of the Electroclan. If we don't win, no one will even know that we tried. How's that for a stupid dilemma? At least we'll have no reason to die ashamed.

* * *

My name is Michael Vey. If you're still following the insanity of my life, then you've been all around the world with me. From my home

in Meridian, Idaho (which I doubt I'll ever see again), we went to California, where we broke into the Elgen Academy and I was captured and put into Cell 25. (Yeah, I still have nightmares about that.) Then we broke out, attacked Dr. Hatch, and freed all his GPs, aka human guinea pigs.

You went with me to Peru, where we brought down the Elgen Starxource plant after Dr. Hatch tried to feed me to, like, a million rats. It's also where we lost Wade.

We traveled west to the Port of Lima, where we sunk two of the Elgen's boats—their main command ship, the *Ampere*, and their battleship, the *Watt*. Unfortunately, Dr. Hatch got off the *Ampere* just before it blew up.

Then we went to Taiwan, where we rescued a genius little girl named Jade Dragon before the Elgen could get what she knew out of her head—mainly how to get their MEI machine to make more of us—electric people. It was after our escape from the Taiwan Starxource plant that we found out that the Elgen had attacked Timepiece Ranch, our home base and the resistance's headquarters in Mexico.

We flew back to the ranch—or at least what was left of it after the Elgen helicopters bombed it to ashes. We thought that everyone was dead, until we were found by Gervaso, who took us to the resistance's new headquarters at Christmas Ranch near Zion National Park in southern Utah. Then Taylor, Gervaso, Ian, and I went back to Boise, where we rescued Taylor's parents.

Still, in spite of all we've done, the Elgen just keep growing stronger. Now we have a plan to stop them once and for all. We're going to the Elgen base in the South Pacific island nation of Tuvalu, to steal the *Joule*—the Elgen's floating piggy bank. As if that's not crazy enough, that's just one of our missions. Hatch has locked up three of his own electric kids for treason—his most powerful: Quentin, Tara, and Torstyn—and we're going to try to free them. I can't believe I'm even considering this. Along with Bryan, those are the same three who made fun of me just before Hatch tried to feed me to his rats in Peru.

This is the first time that all of us electricians (except Grace) will be going on a mission together. Even Tanner and Nichelle. Nichelle will

be extremely valuable if Hatch's electric kids decide not to cooperate. Still, this will be really dangerous for her. She betrayed Hatch the last time they met, and he's not exactly the forgiving type. I'm guessing he'll do anything to make her pay for what she did. Then again, I suppose that's true for all of us.

I know, the whole plan seems crazy. If I had to lay odds on it, I'd say we've got a 10 percent chance of winning this one. I wouldn't tell everyone else that. If I did, I'd have to drop that number to 1 percent, because if you think you're going to fail, you most likely will—at least that's what our gym teacher at Meridian High always said. But whether you think you're going to lose or not, sometimes you do what you have to do because it's the right thing, and let the chips fall where they may.

I think we're about to drop a whole lot of chips.



PART TWO



Two Weeks Earlier

Schema hadn't spoken for nearly a minute when the voice leaned back in his chair. "What's wrong, my friend? Cassy got your tongue?"

"It's not me, sir," Cassy said, brushing her short blond hair back over one ear. "I'm not doing anything."

"I know, Cass," the voice said. "The chairman's in shock. I suppose he wasn't expecting to see me."

"Coonradt," Schema said.

"*Doctor* Coonradt," the voice corrected. "At least that was once my name. Many years ago. Now I'm simply 'the voice.' That is all you will call me."

Schema looked even more confused. “But I don’t understand. . . . You were dead.”

“Because you killed me?”

Schema said nothing.

“Don’t bother to deny it. I know that you tried. You used my own technology against me. And, in a way, you succeeded. Coonradt is dead. After you killed Carl Vey, I knew that I was next. I knew that you were behind his heart attack, because it was my technology that allowed you to do it—a mistake I’ve regretted since I invented it.

“What a simple, perfect way to murder, to give someone a heart attack from a hundred yards away. It’s the perfect weapon. In a way, it’s the same power that Cassy has, except she comes by hers honestly.” He glanced over at Cassy, who slightly nodded.

“You thought I was dead, but rumors of my death were exaggerated. I was sick, mind you. Quite sick for a while. But then it became clear to me that I had to die.”

Schema shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “If you knew what I’d done, why did you rescue me from the Elgen? Why not just let Hatch kill me?” He looked into the voice’s eyes. “Why haven’t you already killed me?”

“Because I want your help to stop Hatch. You have information that will help us dismantle what Hatch is building.”

“My enemy’s enemy is my friend,” Schema said softly.

“No,” the voice said in a low tone. “You are not my friend. You are an *opportunity*. I’m offering you an arrangement, not a friendship. You can help us or not, it’s your choice. But now that you know my identity, if you choose not to cooperate, you will be silenced.”

Schema blinked. “Silenced?”

“I believe that’s the word you once used to order my murder,” the voice said. “Hatch would have fed you to his rats. I, on the other hand, am much more merciful. But if you reveal my identity, thousands, maybe millions, will die. Your life is not worth that. So make no mistake, you will be . . . *silenced*.” The voice turned to Cassy. “Go ahead and attach the arrestor.”

“Yes, sir,” Cassy said. She walked out of the room.

“What’s an arrestor?” Schema asked.

“Your new companion.”

Cassy walked back into the room carrying a small box. She stood in front of Schema. “Take off your shirt, please.”

Schema looked at her, then back at the voice. “What are you doing?”

“Let me be clear,” the voice said. “Your very existence hangs by a thread. Don’t get into the habit of questioning orders. I am not your employee or your subordinate. I do not have time to trifle with you. You will obey me without question or die quickly.” His eyes narrowed and he spoke slowly, carefully enunciating each word. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Then take it off.”

Schema quickly pulled off his shirt, exposing his tan, flabby body.

“Now put your arms through here,” Cassy said.

The device she was putting on him looked a lot like the Elgen RESAT. Schema put his arms through the straps, and Cassy slid the device forward. A thin, rubber-coated box about the size of a cell phone rested over his heart. Cassy locked the straps, then took the other two straps from the box and brought them around Schema’s ribs and snapped them shut in back.

“You are familiar with the RESAT machines, of course,” the voice said. “This is patterned after them, but based on the same technology that you used to kill Carl Vey. Except I’ve made a few improvements.” The voice lifted a small remote. “If you are a half mile or more from the central monitor, which is secured somewhere in this building, the arrestor will automatically activate, immediately stopping your heart. If I push this button, right here, the arrestor will activate, stopping your heart. If you try to remove the device, the arrestor will activate, stopping your heart.”

“Of course Cassy can do any of this without technology, but I wanted insurance in case you think you can escape while we’re not around. You will wear the arrestor until I take it off you.”

Cassy fastened the final lock, then stepped back. The machine hummed quietly as two diodes began blinking.

“It’s on,” Cassy said.

The voice lifted the remote in front of him, his index finger hovering a quarter inch above a red button. “One push, and your heart ceases to beat.”

“I get the idea,” Schema said, sounding more annoyed than scared.

“Of course you do,” the voice said. “You’ve held others’ lives in your hands for some time. How does it feel to be on the opposite end of the leash?”

“Humbling,” Schema said. “But Hatch already put me on that end of the leash.”

“Yes, he has. And it’s time to talk about him. Time is of the essence. We have a plan we are about to put into motion.” The voice leaned forward. “We are going to the heart of the Elgen. We are going to steal the *Joule*.”

Schema looked unimpressed. “That’s a foolish idea. The *Joule* is tighter than Fort Knox. Trust me, the ship is impenetrable.”

“*Nothing* is impenetrable.”

“The *Joule* is. Its security systems can’t be breached. And it keeps its periphery. If anything comes within three hundred meters, it submerges. Its protocols are unbending.”

“Which is why we need you to help us steal it. We need to know the ship’s security features and its crew’s protocols.” The voice leaned back in his seat. “If you help us steal the *Joule*, you get your life back. We’ll give you a hundred million dollars from the boat and allow you to regain control of the Elgen company.”

“I want Hatch’s head on a stake.”

“You can get his head yourself. Take your money and buy an army. But first we need to steal the boat. We need protocols and security features.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Schema said. “But Hatch has probably already changed the protocols.”

“We’ll take what you can give us.”

“I can get you the boat’s schematics. . . . There are plans—blueprints.”

“Where are they?”

“They were on the *Ampere*.”

“We sunk the *Ampere*.”

“I know. I was there. But the plans are still on it. And the *Ampere* is resting in only seventy feet of water. The Peruvian government hasn’t started to move it yet. The plans are protected in a waterproof safe in the captain’s suite. If you can get to the *Ampere*, I can tell you how to get into the safe.”

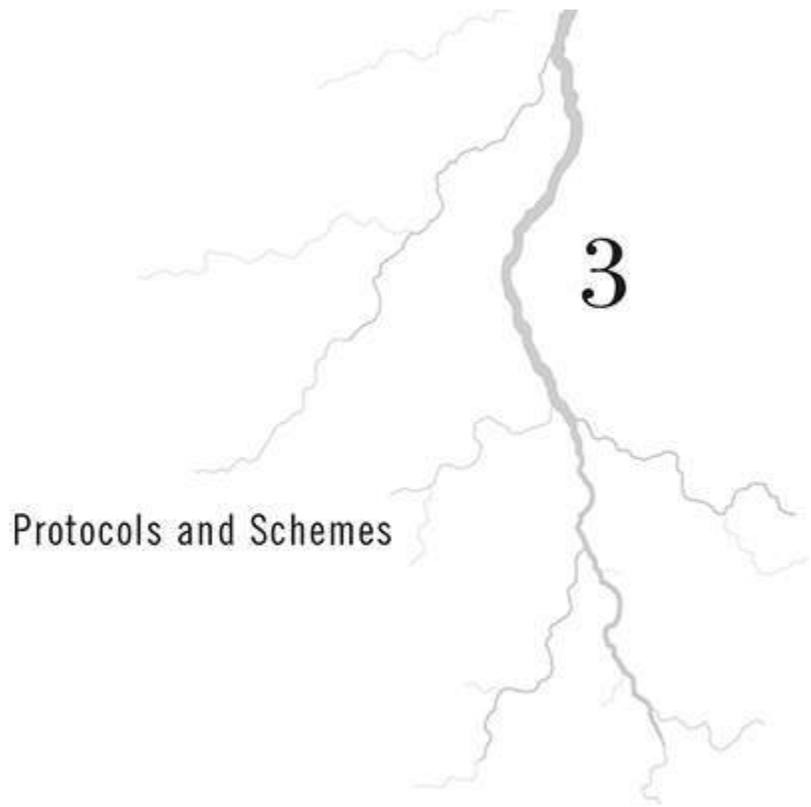
The voice nodded slowly. “All right, that’s a beginning.” He turned. “Cassy, please tell Maggie to come in.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then come back yourself. I want you here for this. I want you to know everything about our plans.”

Cassy’s eyebrows rose. “I’m going to be involved in this mission?”

“Maybe. This might be too big even for the Electroclan.”



Cassy followed Maggie into the room, and the two women took seats next to Schema.

“Tell us everything you know,” the voice said. “Use the board.”

Schema walked up to the whiteboard mounted on the wall on the west side of the room.

“Use the stylus. Just write. It will automatically record everything on my computer.”

Schema lifted a silver, pen-like instrument. It beeped slightly when it touched the board’s surface. “This is what I know. First, the *Joule* always stays at least six hundred meters from any shore.”

“It was docked in Peru when we sank the *Ampere*.”

“I’m telling you the protocols I know,” Schema said. “Like I said, Hatch could have changed them. In Peru, it was likely that with the number of guards and ships in the area, Hatch felt invulnerable and

got lazy and impatient, so he moved it in to load before crossing to Tuvalu.”

“All right, so he’s human—almost. Are there any other exceptions to that protocol?”

“During maintenance. But the *Joule* is only maintained in the Elgen shipyard.”

“Where’s that?”

“Off the western coast of Italy, near Fiumicino.”

“That’s a long way from Tuvalu.”

“If there was an emergency, they’d have to improvise.”

The voice thought for a moment, then said, “We could create an emergency. That might be usable. Continue.”

“Most of the time, the *Joule* stays partially submerged and only rises for supplies or when the crew changes, which is every three months.”

“When is it due a crew change?”

Schema bowed his head to think. After a moment he looked up. “If they’ve maintained their schedule, then they changed crews just two weeks ago.”

“That won’t help us. What about their supply schedule?”

“The galley crew leaves the *Joule* on surface boats and handles the food and necessities. No non-crew personnel are allowed within three hundred meters of the boat. Ever. If the guards or land crew see any unknown person or if the crew reports anything suspicious, the land crew is abandoned and the *Joule* submerges. Everything is done by a strict schedule that is only known by crew and top Elgen brass. The only exception allowed is if the admiral-general visits. Or an EGG.”

“How often do they do that?”

“They don’t, that I know of. But they could.” Schema lifted the stylus and wrote. “Number two, the crew constantly monitors the waters around them. If anything comes near, the boat submerges. I mean *anything*. It once submerged for a school of barracuda. Also, if there is an emergency onshore, it submerges.

“Number three, the *Joule* always travels with a battleship escort.”

“This isn’t going to be easy,” Cassy said.

“Easy?” Schema said, smirking. “It’s *impossible*. I told you, she’s impenetrable.” Schema looked at them. “Trust me, the security is

perfect.”

“Nothing is impossible. Nothing is perfect. There must be some way.”

Schema thought for a moment, then said, “The only chance would be with help from the inside. It would have to be someone high up.”

“How high?”

Schema shook his head. “Hatch or an EGG. Nothing less. But you’ll never get an EGG. They’re the elite—sworn loyal to death. They’ll never turn.”

“One already has.”

Schema looked at him disbelieving. “Hatch has lost one of his EGGs?”

“His chief EGG,” the voice said.

“David Welch?”

“Yes.”

Schema’s brow fell. “That’s unbelievable. And Hatch hasn’t already killed him?”

“Welch is on the run. For now.”

“Where is he?”

“If we knew that, we might not be having this conversation.”

“Welch knows everything. If something had happened to Hatch, Welch would have taken over the Elgen. Welch could get you onto the *Joule*.”

The voice thought a moment, then said, “All right, our priority has changed to find Welch.” He turned to Maggie. “Get me Simon at Christmas Ranch.”



Hatch inspected his personal guard, then returned alone to his room to read. A half hour later his door opened and Hatch's servant, a beautiful, long-haired Filipino woman, walked in. She left a glass of Scotch on the table, then bowed to him. "As you requested, Excellency."

"Thank you," Hatch said.

"My pleasure, sir. May I do anything else for you?"

"Go to the dispensary and get me Ambien and Seroquel."

"Ambien and Seroquel?"

"They're sleeping pills."

"Yes, sir. How many?"

"Just bring me the bottles."

"Immediately, sir."

Hatch went back to his book as his servant hurried from the room. For the last week he hadn't been sleeping well. Most people living the

horror and violence of his life wouldn't sleep well, if they could at all—their consciences wouldn't allow it. But Hatch wasn't wired that way. He didn't lose any more sleep over sending someone to the rat bowl than he would destroying a digital foe in a video game.

Hatch thought of himself as a warrior in that way, or, even more so, a general. It was logic. You couldn't become overly sentimental over one soldier if you wanted to defeat an army. Sentimentality didn't work in war. Hatch prided himself on being above such “small-mindedness,” as he called it. If you couldn't sacrifice a few men for the many, you could never be trusted to lead.

What was costing him sleep was just *one* man. Welch. As his former top man and EGG, Welch knew things. No, Welch knew *everything*. He not only knew the Elgen's plans; he knew their strategies and methods of achieving them. He knew their technology. He even knew their finances. Most of all, he knew Hatch. Welch was a threat greater than the resistance because he was the ultimate insider—a cancerous tumor inside the Elgen brain. Welch in the wrong hands, or speaking into the wrong ear, could spell disaster for the Elgen, and for Hatch personally. As long as Welch lived, Hatch's plans were in peril. Welch needed to be exterminated no matter the cost.

Hatch regretted not just shooting Welch the night he was arrested. He wouldn't make that mistake again. But first Welch needed to be found, and that was no simple matter. Welch had overseen nearly all of the Elgen hunts for more than a decade and was personally responsible for finding six of the Glows. He knew the Elgen search techniques better than Hatch did. Finding Welch in Taiwan would be like finding a grain of rice in a rice paddy—a grain of rice that knew you were looking for it and knew how to be invisible. No matter—he would be found. And next time Hatch wouldn't wait for a show execution. The million-dollar reward he had offered was for a dead Welch, not a live one.



PART THREE



Former EGG David Welch was barely twenty-one years old the night his destiny collided with the Elgen. In fact, his birthday had been the day before, and he was still tired from staying up too late with his college roommates.

The moon was unusually bright that night, and even that played a part in his fate. Welch was delivering pizzas for a local company, Sasquatch Pizza, when he was sent out on a delivery to the Elgen building.

He had parked his car, a '72 Camaro in need of a paint job, in the restricted delivery zone in front of the new Elgen building. He thought that the building and grounds were impressive, with a seven-story-high tower and laboratory with a bronze-colored, mirrored glass exterior.

The entire twenty-four-block area had been developed as a research park, and he was always glad when he got called there on a delivery, as

many of the people who worked at the buildings were rich and tipped well. Once, someone tipped him a fifty-dollar bill—a near fortune for him.

That night he was about to get out of his car when he noticed a shadowy figure creeping through the cactus garden near the building's front windows.

Recently some of Welch's coworkers had been robbed making deliveries, so he kept alert. Welch lifted the vinyl pizza carrier bags from his backseat and got out of his car, locking it behind him—something he rarely did.

The figure in the shadows seemed too active, too intent, to be a homeless person looking for somewhere to sleep. Welch wondered if they were trying to break into the building. That too would be odd, since there were obviously people inside, who, Welch reminded himself, were waiting for their pizzas.

With his arms full of pizza boxes he started up the front walkway toward the entry. That's when the darkened figure cocked back its arm and threw something at the front window, breaking a large, jagged hole in the glass. The sound of shattering glass was followed by the wail of an alarm.

Welch's first thought was that he would be blamed for breaking the window, as he appeared to be alone and was within throwing distance of the window. A man in a gray-and-black security uniform appeared near the front window, looking directly at him.

Then the vandal sprang from the garden, sprinting diagonally across the building's front walkway in Welch's direction. Instinctively, Welch dropped his pizzas and took off to intercept the man. Welch was built for pursuit. Even though he was large and muscular, he was also quick. He had played both linebacker and lineman on his high school's football team.

Welch leveled the guy, who was barely half his size and at least ten years older than him, with a waist-high tackle. Then he picked him up by the waist and carried him over to the front entryway, where there were now three security guards rushing out of the building.

"I caught this guy," Welch said. "He threw a rock through your window."

“It was a brick,” the head security guard replied. He was a stern-looking man with a broad, flat nose from being broken multiple times. He was a few inches shorter than Welch but even broader of shoulder. He looked at the man in Welch’s arms, then shook his head. “You can put him down. But don’t let go of him.”

Welch did as the guard said.

“His name is Dominic. He used to work here in the accounting office. They canned him yesterday. I think he just lost his severance.” He turned to the guard next to him. “How far out are the police?”

“About five minutes.”

“Let them know we have the perpetrator.”

The disgruntled employee, Dominic, suddenly tried to free himself from Welch’s grasp. Welch clamped down on him until he cried out, “This is brutality! I’m going to report you! I’ll sue!”

The head guard laughed. “What a wuss.” He looked into the man’s face. “Unfortunately for you, Dominic, this man doesn’t work for us. He can do whatever he wants.”

“I’m going to sue you for everything you’ve got!” he shouted at Welch.

Welch laughed. “What I’ve got? I’ve got a lot of school debt, a broken-down car, and some textbooks. I don’t think a lawyer would work for that.”

Dominic continued to rant. “I’ll report you to the police. You have no right to hold me against my will.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the head guard said. “We have every right to hold you. And prosecute you.”

“You’ll pay for this. I’ll make you—”

At that moment Welch belted him across the face, knocking him out. The man dropped to the ground. Welch looked anxiously up at the guards. “Sorry. I hate whiners.”

A broad smile crossed the head guard’s face. “Nice punch.”

The other guards nodded in agreement. “Well done.”

“You think I’ll get in trouble?” Welch asked.

“Nope,” the head guard said. “We saw exactly what happened. Dominic threw a brick through the window. When you tried to stop him, he assaulted you. It was self-defense.”

“That’s what we saw,” one of the other guards said.

The head guard nodded. “We’ll erase that part of the security tape, just in case.”

“Thanks,” Welch said.

A police car pulled up to the curb and two officers got out. They walked up, looking at the unconscious man on the ground. Finally one of the officers asked, “Is that the guy?”

“That’s the loser we caught vandalizing the building,” the head guard said. “He threw a brick through the window.”

The officers looked over at the building. “That hole?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why is he unconscious?”

“The pizza guy tried to stop him and the man attacked him. It was self-defense.”

The officer looked at Welch, then at the man on the ground, then back at Welch. “He attacked this guy? He’s half his size.”

“He was out of control,” the head guard said. “He was trying to get away.”

“If you’re willing to testify, we’ll book him for assault as well,” the cop said.

“Of course we will.”

One of the officers squatted down and shook the man. Dominic groaned.

“Sir, please roll onto your stomach. We’re going to handcuff you.”

Dominic was still too dazed to offer any resistance. The police officers handcuffed him. “Can you stand?”

“I—I don’t know,” he stuttered.

The officers lifted him up, then walked him to the squad car, placing him in the backseat.

After the police car drove away, the head guard turned to Welch. “I’m starving. You brought some pizzas?”

Welch nodded. “Yes, sir. Let me get them.” He ran back over to where he’d dropped his boxes and retrieved them. “Sorry, they’re probably not going to be hot after all that.”

“How much do we owe you?”

“Thirty-nine dollars.”

The head guard handed him a hundred-dollar bill. "Keep the change."

"Thank you."

He put out his hand. "My name is Patrick."

"David," Welch said.

The guard lifted the lid of the box. "You like this stuff?"

"The Monster Meat Lover?"

Patrick laughed. "No. Delivering your . . . meat lovers whatever."

"It's a job. I'm working my way through college."

"What are you studying?"

"Criminal science."

"With your build, you could play football."

"I did. Lost interest."

"What's your last name?"

"Welch. Like the jam."

Patrick smiled. "All right, Welch-like-the-jam. Looks like you can handle yourself in a jam. Do you want a real job?"

"Doing what?"

"Security detail here. You can work at night, go to school in the day. I guarantee it will pay a lot better than delivering pizzas."

"I meet girls delivering pizza," Welch said.

Patrick laughed. "But do you impress them?"

Welch didn't answer.

"You'll impress girls working here. Not that every girl doesn't want a . . . pizza delivery boy."

"Now you're mocking me."

"Am I right?"

"I can see how that would be true," Welch said.

"Good. Do you have class tomorrow?"

"Until three."

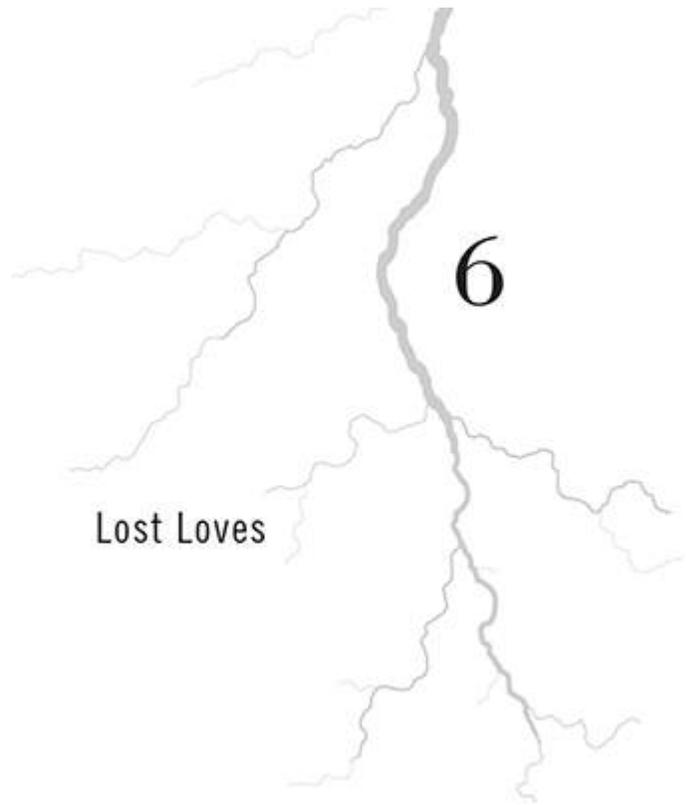
"Come at four; I'll take you in to HR and get you hired."

"Wait. What does it pay?"

"The position starts at fifty K a year. With benefits. Insurance. Christmas bonus and paid vacation after six months."

Welch had never even made half that. "Thank you."

“Don’t mention it. The stars aligned tonight. I’ve got a feeling you’re supposed to be here.”



Welch's childhood had been less than idyllic. His biological parents were drug addicts, and he had lived in and out of foster homes before, at the age of seven, he was permanently adopted by a family.

The adoption didn't go well. Welch was rebellious and had a violent temper. Part of his problem was that he had always been larger than the other children his age and subsequently hung out with older kids. He was with teenagers four years older than him when they were caught stealing a car from a Walmart parking lot.

After his arrest, his adopted family "un-adopted" him, and Welch was sent to juvenile detention for eight months. It was the best thing that ever happened to him.

One of the police officers at the facility, a rugged former Golden Gloves boxer, took an interest in Welch and became his mentor. That relationship changed everything. Welch stopped acting out and got serious about school, where he learned, for the first time, he was not

dumb like many had told him, but rather he had an above-average intelligence. He was also a gifted athlete. Much to his previous foster families' surprise, Welch not only graduated from high school, but did so with a 3.98 grade point average and an academic and sports scholarship.

That summer, Welch was in his third year of studying criminal science. His scholarship only covered tuition and books, so he got a job delivering pizzas. He'd worked for the pizzeria just three months before the evening when he subdued the vandal at the Elgen building.

* * *

Patrick, the Elgen's head security guard, had been accused of hiring his guards by the pound, and Welch was no exception. But it soon became clear to him that Welch was more than muscle; he was a quick learner and ambitious, and within just six months he was promoted to head of the graveyard shift.

Welch liked the work and the pay but found it a little lonely. He would patrol the dark, quiet halls of the Elgen building at night, sometimes hoping someone would break in just to liven things up. Oftentimes he would look in through the glass windows of the fifth-floor laboratory and watch the scientists at work, wondering what they were doing. He didn't know them, at least not personally, but he knew the pecking order.

The main scientist was a man known as Dr. Coonradt. It seemed to Welch that Coonradt had no life outside of his work, as he was always there. Many times it was only the two of them in the building.

One night Coonradt called Welch over to the laboratory.

"Yes, sir?" Welch asked, wondering what the scientist wanted.

"Come in for a moment, please."

"Yes, sir." Welch stepped into the laboratory.

"What's your name?" Coonradt asked.

"Welch, sir."

Coonradt smiled. "I can read your name tag. What's your first name?"

"David."

“Well, David, have a drink with me.”

“Thank you, sir, but I can’t. I’m on the job.”

Coonradt still poured two crystal glasses half full from a bottle of champagne. “I’m giving you permission. A sip of Dom Pérignon won’t jeopardize our security. It’s a special occasion. I’m celebrating a breakthrough.” He extended the drink to Welch.

Welch just looked at the glass. “I’m really sorry, but I don’t drink alcohol.”

Coonradt looked at him in surprise. “A teetotaler, that’s refreshing.” He set down the glass, walked over to a refrigerator, and brought back a bottle. “Then have a Coke.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Both men sat down.

“Why don’t you drink? You a Mormon?”

“No, sir. My biological father was an alcoholic. I figured I inherited his genes.”

“You’re a smart man,” Coonradt said. He took a drink.

“What kind of breakthrough are we celebrating?” Welch asked.

“A big one. It has to do with a variation of the standard magnetic vector created when a polyatomic ion is covalently bonded—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Welch said, raising a hand. “You lost me way before polyatomic zions, or whatever you said.”

Coonradt laughed. “Sorry. I get carried away sometimes.”

Welch took a swig from his cola. “You’re always here.”

“It would seem that way. My work is my life. It’s my wife, my family, my religion.” His voice fell a little. “It’s the only thing I have left.” Welch thought he saw a flash of pain in the scientist’s eyes. Coonradt sipped his champagne, then put his glass down. “What about you? Do you have anyone you can’t live without?”

“I had a girlfriend for a while, but we broke up about six months ago.”

“Was it mutual?”

“No. She dumped me for a med student.”

“I’m sorry. Are you pining for her?”

“Pining?”

“Sorry, it’s an old-fashioned word. Do you miss her?”

“Yes, sir.”

Coonradt lifted his glass again. “Then we’ll toast lost loves.”

Welch lifted his drink. “To lost loves,” he said as they clinked the glasses together.

Welch drank, then looked at the scientist. “Do you have lost loves?”

Coonradt looked down for a moment, finished his drink, then lifted the one he’d poured for Welch and took a drink from it as well. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft.

“Yes. Two loves. My mother when I was fourteen, my wife eleven years ago. I lost both of them to cancer. Technically, I lost three, I guess. My wife was three months pregnant when she died. I lost my child, too.”

“I’m sorry.”

Coonradt took another drink. “Me too.”

“Did you ever consider marrying again?”

“No. Not seriously. I suppose that I feel cursed. I couldn’t bear another loss. But life has a way of figuring itself out. It’s why I’m where I am right now. I decided to dedicate my life to revenge.”

“Revenge? On who?”

“On cancer. It’s a living organism, and I am going to kill it, just as it killed my loved ones. Turnabout is fair play, right?” He took another drink.

Welch looked at him with admiration. “Yes, sir. I think that’s pretty awesome.”

“Thank you. And if I succeed, I will save millions of lives and make the Elgen Corporation billions upon billions of dollars.” He sighed deeply. “Well, I better get back to work and let you get back to yours. Thank you for celebrating with me.”

Welch quickly stood, taking the comment as his dismissal. “Thank you, sir. For the drink and the talk. Congratulations on your breakthrough. Maybe someday you’ll win a Nobel Prize.”

Coonradt smiled. “That would be nice. Not so much for the prize, but because it would mean that I had accomplished something.” He stood. “And it’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Welch. I wish you a long future and much success at Elgen Incorporated.”



Coonradt's breakthrough in magnetism didn't cure cancer or win a Nobel Prize, even though he was nominated for one. It did make the Elgen Corporation hundreds of millions of dollars.

During the apex of their growth, the Elgen's CEO, a man named Briton Hill, died unexpectedly, and the board immediately set to work searching for a new leader. They ended up hiring away the CEO of an upstart pharmaceutical company, an ambitious young MIT graduate named Charles James Hatch.

Eight months previous to the change in leadership, Welch's boss, Patrick, had retired and Welch became the acting head of Elgen security.

Welch never forgot the first day he met Hatch. He was called into the new Elgen CEO's office for an introduction.

"Come in. Sit down," Hatch said forcefully.

Welch sat down uncomfortably in one of the two leather chairs in front of the CEO's desk.

"So you're our head of security," Hatch said, staring at him intensely.

"Yes, sir."

"Do we need security?"

"Yes, sir."

Hatch smiled. "I would expect you to say that. In fact, I would have been disappointed if you'd answered to the contrary."

"Yes, sir."

"Would you like a drink?"

"No, sir. I don't drink."

"We'll fix that," Hatch said.

He stood and walked over to a decanter filled with an amber liquid and poured himself a glass. Then another. "And why is it that we need security? Industrial espionage?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long have you been here?"

"Seven years, sir."

"And during that time, Mr. Welch, have you stopped anyone from stealing our patents?"

"I don't know, sir. Deterrence can't always be measured."

"Good answer," Hatch said, smiling. "Good answer." He stood in front of Welch and stared at him for nearly a minute without speaking. Welch had never met anyone like Hatch before. He was already starting to dislike his new boss.

"David L. Welch. You've had a rocky childhood, in and out of foster homes, bad friends, delinquency and crime. Still, you somehow turned your life around and went to college to study criminal science. I can see why. We often become what we hate in order to take away our fear of it." He took a drink. "But then you dropped out to work here. Good career move?"

"I thought so at the time," Welch said.

"And you don't now?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

“On whether or not you’re going to fire me.”

Hatch looked at him for a moment, then laughed. “I’m not going to fire you. There’d be a mutiny. You’re beloved here—practically an icon. And yes, of course, Elgen Inc. needs security. And, as we grow, that need will grow. And you, Mr. Welch, your salary and your future will grow with it.” He leaned forward and looked intently into Welch’s eyes. “*If* you are loyal.” He held out the second drink. “Now drink with me, sir.”

Welch just looked at the glass.

“It’s not polite to turn down a gesture of friendship. That wouldn’t be loyal, would it?”

Welch took the glass.

“To your future with the Elgen,” Hatch said. “I’ve a feeling it’s going to be a wild ride.”

“To the future,” Welch said. He lifted the glass, paused, then took a drink. The ride had begun.



Hatch was an expert at manipulation. He was continually grooming Welch, testing his loyalty and rewarding or punishing him accordingly. After the disaster with the MEI, when Hatch was fired as CEO, Welch was the first person he called into his office.

“I want you to hear this from me first,” Hatch said bitterly. “I’ve been removed as Elgen CEO. They’ve replaced me with an Italian jester named Giacomo Schema.”

Welch was stunned by the news. “Why?”

“The malfunction of the MEI. The board is terrified that if the word gets out and the deaths are linked to us, it could cost us billions.”

“Where will you go?” Welch asked.

“Nowhere. I’m staying here. As director.”

Welch was even more surprised. “With all due respect, sir, they’re not firing you?”

Hatch grinned. “Fire *me*?”

“That seems to be the standard corporate procedure.”

“No,” Hatch said. “They can’t.”

“Why is that?”

Hatch smiled. “Precisely *because* the board is terrified that if the word gets out and the deaths are linked to us, it could cost us billions. I let them know that if they fired me, there was a very good chance that word would get out. Not from me, of course. But via an anonymous source.”

Hatch reached into his desk drawer and brought out a large manila envelope. He handed it across the desk to Welch. “Keep this somewhere safe. If anything happens to me, I want you to take this envelope to the *Wall Street Journal*. The precise contact information is inside. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. I knew I could depend on you.” He looked at Welch for a moment, then said, “Be assured, this is only a temporary setback. I will run this company again.”

“I believe you, sir.”

“I know. You’ve been loyal from the beginning, and trust me, your loyalty will be rewarded. Until then, I will see that you retain your position. However, I would like to broaden your responsibilities.”

“How so, sir?”

“I want you to gather information on each member of the board, especially Schema. I want to know the skeletons in their closets, their loves, their affairs, their thought crimes, their every vulnerability. Everything. Can I count on you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you to forget what you know about corporate security and start running the Elgen guard like an army, with you its general.”

Welch nodded, excited at the prospect. “I can do that.”

“One more thing. And this must never leave this room. Schema is talking about silencing some of those who are potential leaks.”

“By ‘silencing,’ you mean . . . *killing*?” Welch said.

“Exactly.”

“Who in particular is he considering silencing?”

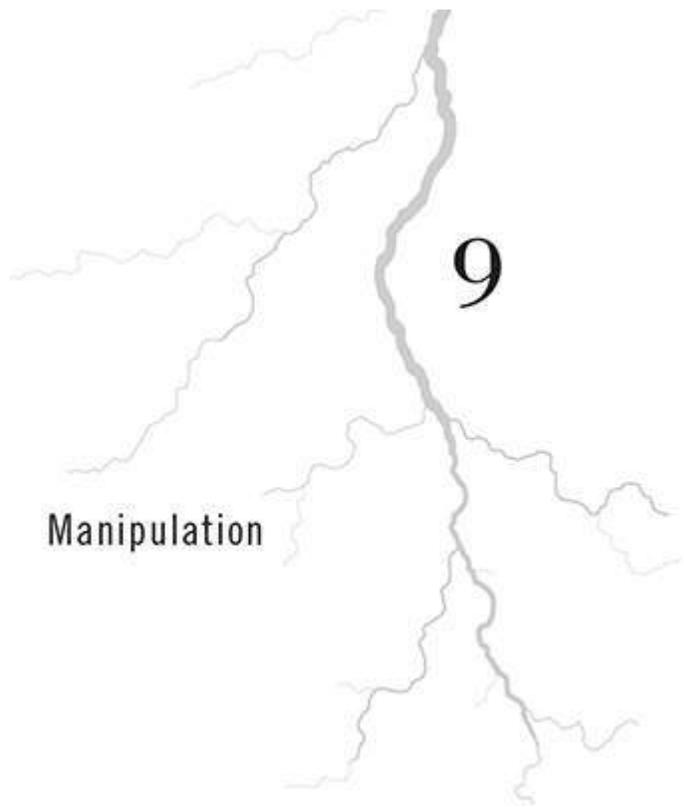
“Carl Vey, the research manager from the Pasadena Hospital; his assistant, Anna Ferguson; and our own head of research and development, Dr. Coonradt.”

Welch’s chest froze. “Dr. Coonradt?”

“Yes. Those are the main names. And if Schema’s making a list, you can bet that I’m on it as well. That’s why I gave you the envelope.”

“Yes, sir.” Welch looked down at the envelope, then back up at Hatch. “Do you think it will come to that?”

“I don’t know,” Hatch said. “But billions of dollars are at stake. You’d be surprised at what people will do for a little money.”



Everything Hatch predicted, with the exception of his own murder, came true. Carl Vey and, presumably, Coonradt, were terminated. Vey's assistant, Anna Ferguson, went into hiding.

It was only a few years after that that the existence of the electric children was revealed. It was Hatch who learned about them. He was looking into the children who had survived, to see if any of them had subsequently died of MEI complications, when he discovered, from confidential state and medical records, that the survivors had been affected in peculiar ways.

The first electric child discovered was Nichelle. She'd been in foster care from the time she was very young, and state records showed that she had been in and out of an unusually high number of homes—sometimes only lasting a day or two before being transferred to a new one. Foster families she'd stayed with reported that she was an

unusually challenging little girl, and several of the homes she'd lived in had burned down, typically due to damage to the electrical systems.

It was the note about damaged electrical systems that piqued Hatch's interest. The next afternoon he arranged to have Nichelle kidnapped from the backyard of her latest foster home, where she was found uprooting a bed of flowers.

It took the Elgen a few days, but after running her through a series of tests, they determined that she was essentially an electrical ground wire. From that point on, Hatch was motivated to find the other electrical children, and one by one they were brought into the Elgen, where their powers were discovered and developed.

* * *

As Elgen director, Hatch continued to work as if he ran the company. He also began steering the Elgen on a new course. Shortly before his "death," Coonradt had demonstrated to the Elgen board how the MEI could electrify rats. While initially Schema considered the discovery nothing more than a curiosity, Hatch recognized the potential for a new source of electrical energy and, with board approval, launched the Starxource Plant Initiative (SPI), turning the Elgen into a massively profitable corporation and setting them on a trajectory to someday become the richest company in the world.

Internally, Hatch took draconian measures to guarantee that his mandates were followed and his power protected—measures that included spying, wiretapping, murder, and extortion.

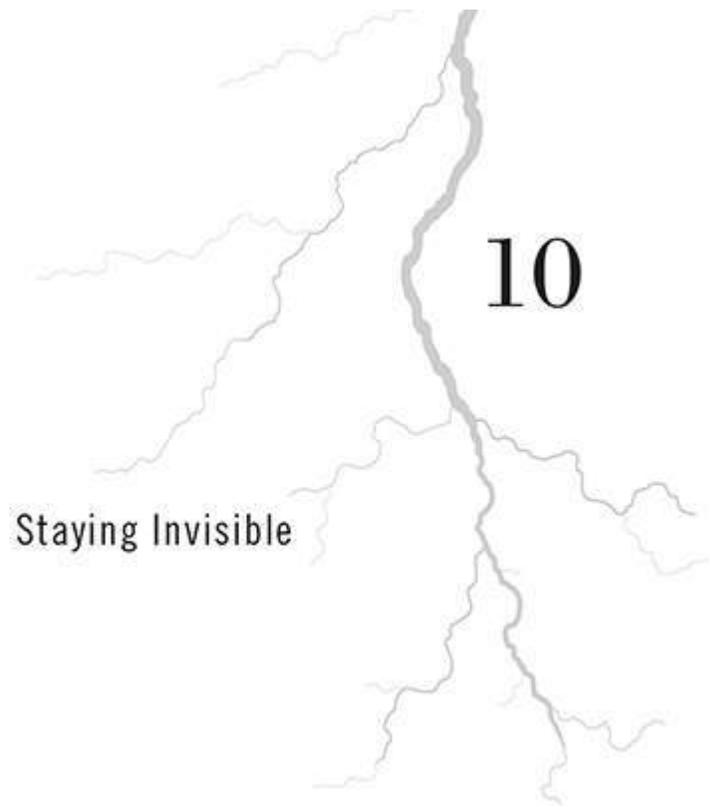
The first person Welch killed was a man named Paul Wang, a former Elgen scientist who was caught trying to sell Elgen secrets. Hatch convinced Welch to kill the man the same way he'd gotten Welch to take that first drink of alcohol—a simple, quiet request. After Welch had blood on his hands, he was much easier to manipulate. And no one was better at manipulation than Hatch.

* * *

Once the Elgen, under Schema's guidance, moved their operations from the United States to international waters, it became relatively

easy for Hatch to launch his takeover of the Elgen by force. The coup was organized and carried out on the command ship *Ampere* by Welch and his two senior Elgen commanders. By that time, Hatch had turned the Elgen security into an active personal army solely under his control.

Hatch and Welch together created the complex hierarchy of the Elgen guard. Hatch was named supreme commander, general, then admiral-general, while Welch became his chief EGG and right-hand man. That is, until Hatch sentenced his most loyal and enduring friend to death.



Kaohsiung, Taiwan EGG Welch's Escape

Welch and the brig's guards were in a cab in the bustling center of downtown Kaohsiung, Taiwan, just three city blocks from the docked *Faraday*, when Tara's power wore off. Suddenly Welch looked like himself instead of the Taiwanese prisoner the guards thought they were escorting off the ship. The guard in the backseat with Welch was the first to notice.

"What the . . ."

Quentin had disarmed the guards before they left the boat, and Welch, who was waiting for the moment, lifted the guard's own gun on him. "Not who you expected?"

The guard looked at him in fear. "EGG Welch."

The guard in the front turned back, his eyes wide with surprise. "No. It's impossible."

"Enigmatic, perhaps, but clearly not impossible. Unfortunately, you've just aided the escape of Admiral-General Hatch's most prized prisoner. He's going to be so unhappy with you. I would wager good money that it's the rat bowl for both of you."

The guard next to Welch stammered, "But—but—we didn't know it was you."

"Come now, man. You really think that will matter to Hatch?"

The guards knew the answer.

"What are you going to do with us?" the backseat guard asked.

"Nothing," Welch said. "It's catch and release. You're no use to me now. In a few minutes I'll let one of you off; then I'll let the other one of you off a few miles later. Now empty your pockets. Give me all the money you have. Hurry."

The men pulled out their money and handed it to Welch. In all it was less than two thousand yuan, not as much as Welch hoped or needed, certainly not enough to get him out of the country.

Welch stuffed the guards' money into his shirt pocket. "*Sye, sye.*"

"How do you know that we won't just turn you in to the Elgen?" the guard in front asked.

Welch shook his head. "Are you trying to convince me to just shoot you now?"

The man blanched. "No, sir."

"I'm probably giving you too much credit, but you won't turn me in because you're not that stupid. It would be a death warrant for either of you. Hatch is merciless. He never forgets and he never forgives. You broke three Elgen protocols in my escape, and now you're guilty of aiding an Elgen fugitive. Hoping for mercy from the admiral-general would be like waiting at a bus stop for an airplane. No matter your excuse, you'll be executed. Shot if you're lucky, but most likely fed to the rats, since that amuses him."

The guards were speechless. They knew Welch was right.

"And in case you're not as smart as I give you credit for and you're still thinking of taking a chance on turning me in, Quentin is waiting for you. He's already reported you as accomplices in my escape, so

you'll be shot on sight, but if for some reason you're not, Torstyn will see to it that you never speak. He can fry your brains from a hundred yards out. Don't forget, his life is on the line too. Trust me, there's no going back. You'd better hide."

"Where?"

Welch's brow furrowed. "You ask me where? Do I have to do your thinking for you? This is one of the most populated cities in the world. Blend in."

"But we don't look Chinese," the front-seat guard said.

"And I don't speak Chinese," the other added.

"Wear a disguise," Welch said. "And how hard can it be to speak Chinese? Little children speak it."

"Where are you going?" the front-seat guard asked.

"If I told you that, I'd have to kill you."

"Let us come with you."

Welch shook his head. "No. Three Americans will stand out too much. Besides, it's only a matter of time before the temptation for one of you to turn me in would be too great." Welch leaned forward. "*Syan sheng, ching ni ting yi sya dzai nei byan.*"

"*Hau, hau,*" the driver said, his words sounding a little like laughter.

Welch turned to the guard at his side. "This is your stop. You have a new FOD; your mission is to survive. Because if the Elgen find you, they'll kill you."

The cab pulled up to the curb in front of a busy sidewalk before the crowded corridors of an open market. Welch leveled the gun at the driver. "And if I see you again, I'll kill you." The guard looked at him, then opened the door. The pungent smell of roasting tofu from a nearby food cart filled the air. "Get out."

"All right, all right." The guard climbed out of the car, looked both ways, then ran off into the thick of the market, quickly vanishing into the bustling crowds.

Welch reached over and pulled the door shut. "*Women dzou ba,*" he said to the driver.

"*Dzai nali?*"

"*Jeng dzou.*"

The driver pulled away from the curb and back into the traffic like a fish thrown back into a slow-moving stream.

“What about me?” the other guard asked.

“A few more miles, then I’ll let you off.”

The man’s head fell into his hands.

Welch said, “Don’t worry too much about your predicament. It was probably only a matter of time before you were found guilty of something and Hatch had you executed. This way you at least have a fighting chance.”

About fifteen minutes later Welch ordered the cab to stop again. They were near the wide, open ground of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial.

The guard made one last appeal. “It’s just the two of us now. We could protect each other.”

“No,” Welch said. “It doesn’t work that way. Now get out. And shut the door behind you.”

The guard unlatched the door, then climbed out. He furtively glanced back at Welch, hoping for a last-minute reprieve, then, not getting it, slammed the door shut, turned, and ran.

“Take me to the train station,” Welch told the driver. “*Hwo che jan, chy.*”

The driver again pulled out into traffic. A few minutes later Welch changed his mind, scolding himself for his carelessness. The train station was the last place he should go, unless he wanted to be found.

No one knew the Elgen’s routine of hunting AWOL guards better than Welch. As captain of the guard for more than fifteen years, he had led the majority of the Elgen’s manhunts, capturing seventy-six of seventy-seven guards, a 98 percent success rate. All but one of the captured guards was executed.

Welch knew exactly what procedures the Elgen would follow. With luck, he figured that he had about five or six hours before he would be discovered missing. That’s how much longer it would be before the changing of the *Faraday’s* guards.

Once Welch’s absence was confirmed, Hatch would be informed and the EGGs would take over, unleashing everything in their arsenal.

In addition to the Elgen guards and the elite Lung Li, the Taiwanese army and police would be looking for him as well.

Using advanced face-recognition software, they would meticulously search through every camera they could access, but especially those at the airports and train stations, where they'd suspect he'd go. They would find him. They would track down his ticket and his destination. For now he was still invisible. He intended to stay that way.

"*Deng yi sya!*" Welch said. *Wait a minute.* He needed a moment to think. As they parked at the curb, he watched two Muslim women passing them on the sidewalk, their heads covered in burkas. *That's the ticket*, he thought. He told the driver to take him to the Kaohsiung Lingya district, the Muslim section of the city.

Across the street from the Lingya mosque was a store with Muslim clothing. Welch purchased the largest burka he could find, then ducked into an alley and put it on. The garment wasn't as long as he needed, falling only to his ankles, but he doubted that the Elgen would notice. He walked back out to a busy street and hailed a new cab for the train station.

In his new disguise, Welch purchased a ticket for the small, southern town of Kangshan. He knew a woman there. Her name was Mei Li, which, in Chinese, means "beautiful." He thought that the name fit. He had met Mei Li when she was working as a waitress at the officers' lounge at the Dzwo Ying Starxource plant. When she was a child, Mei Li's parents had been Christian missionaries in Australia, so she had learned English, though through the years she had forgotten some of it.

* * *

There were three things the Elgen EGGs were strictly prohibited from: first, they could not belong to a religion; second, they could not contact their families; and third, they could not marry or even date. Welch had no trouble with the first two rules but failed the third. He had fallen in love with Mei Li. They started a secret romantic relationship. As their love deepened, Welch diverted a large sum of

money to her—more than 6.5 million yuan, nearly one million American dollars—with the plan of someday running off together.

Welch was careful that they were never seen together, and after Mei Li left the Elgen's employ, Welch erased all record of her employment. As far as the Elgen were concerned, she had never existed. No one, not even Hatch, could trace him to her.

* * *

The train ride to Kangshan was less than an hour from the Kaohsiung station. Welch disembarked with a dozen other passengers, then walked outside the small, open-air station, slightly stooped in his burka and shuffling his feet as he walked.

It took him nearly a half hour to hail a taxi, and it was dark when it let him off three blocks from Mei Li's apartment. He gave the driver most of the money he had left.

He waited a half hour until there was no one in sight; then he climbed the stairs to a second-floor apartment and rang the doorbell. After a moment a feminine voice answered from behind the door. "Wei?"

"Mei Li, it's me. David."

"My David!" she exclaimed. "My love." She slid back the security chain and threw open the door. "I thought you were—" She froze. "Why are you wearing this . . . ?"

Without answering, he quickly stepped inside her apartment, shutting the door behind them. Mei Li was in the middle of fixing dinner, and the home smelled of curry and incense. With his hand on his gun, Welch cautiously examined the apartment. "Are you alone?"

"Yes." She looked at him quizzically. "What is happening?"

"I've left the Elgen." He took off the burka, revealing his face and sweat-stained clothing. "I'm being hunted. I need a place to stay for the night. You're the only one I can trust."

Mei Li looked at him anxiously, then embraced him. "Of course you can stay here." After a moment she looked into his eyes. "Why are you being hunted?"

“I was arrested by Admiral-General Hatch. He condemned me to death.”

She gasped. “Death? For what reason?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve missed you so much.” Welch pulled her in tighter and they kissed. After a moment Welch stepped back. “What am I doing? I never should have come here. I’ve put you in danger.”

“You came to the right place. I can help.”

“No, I never should have involved you.”

“I would not feel loved by you if you had not involved me. Especially if you had gone away without telling me. Tell me now, what do you need?”

Welch breathed out slowly. “I need help getting out of Taiwan. I need some of our money and a phone. A few of them.”

“You can use my phone.”

“No, they’ll find you. I need for you to get me some prepaid phones.”

“The stores are closed now. So is the bank.”

“We can get everything in the morning. I’ll leave tomorrow afternoon.”

“Wherever you go, I will go with you.”

Welch shook his head. “It’s much too dangerous. The sooner we’re apart, the better.”

She sighed. “That would not be better. I would rather die than not see you again.”

Welch kissed her forehead. “I’d rather neither of us die. After I’m safe, I’ll send for you. Then we can be together.”

“Then for now you will stay with me and I will be happy. Are you hungry?”

“I’m starving,” he said. “I don’t remember the last time I ate real food. In the brig they only serve Rabisk.”

“What is Rabisk?”

“It’s made from dead rats.”

She shuddered. “Come eat.”

Welch chained and bolted the door, then followed Mei Li across the room to the kitchen. The apartment had stone tile floors and an

icon mounted to the wall, with a gold-framed picture of Mei Li's deceased parents between sticks of burning incense.

In the kitchen he sat down at the small table.

"I have made curry rice." She brought him a plate piled high with sticky rice covered with a yellow sauce and chunks of chicken meat and green pepper. Then she got a plate for herself and sat down across from him at the table. She let him eat for a moment, then asked, "Do you know where you will go from here?"

He finished chewing, then said, "No. But I wouldn't tell you if I did. It's too dangerous for you."

"I have a cousin who lives near Changhua. He owns a farm in the country. He cannot speak. What is that word?"

"He is *mute*."

"Yes. *Mute*. You can go there. They will never find you there. It is *remote*."

He shook his head. "I'll stand out too much in a country town."

"Not if you wear that clothing. Besides, the village people keep their own stories. It is their way. You can stay there while you make your plans to leave Taiwan."

Too tired to think of a better plan, Welch said, "All right. I'll consider it."

For the next few minutes he ate ravenously as Mei Li watched him, barely picking at her own meal. Then she said, "A week ago there was a story in the newspaper about the Starxource plant and the Elgen. The reporter wrote that in other countries the Elgen had grown so powerful, they had taken control of the government. Is that true?"

Welch looked up from his dinner and nodded. "Yes."

"Do they plan to take control of Taiwan's government?"

"They plan to take control of the whole world."

She looked upset. "Two days ago the newspaper building was . . . explosion. Twelve people were killed. Did the Elgen do that?"

"Probably," Welch said. "It wouldn't be the first time we . . ." He stopped himself. ". . . the *Elgen* has terrorized the media."

Mei Li quietly returned to her dinner. A few minutes later she asked, "If they find you, what will they do?"

“They will kill me. I don’t think that they will bother to capture me alive.”

“Then they must not find you.”

“Not if I can help it.”

“Is there anyone, besides me, who will help you?”

Welch finished his meal, then pushed his plate away. “Maybe.” He looked at her full plate. “You didn’t eat much.”

“I’m not hungry. What else can I get you to eat?”

“Nothing. I just need to sleep.”

“Yes, let’s sleep.”

Welch first went into Mei Li’s bedroom and stacked pillows under the sheets so it looked as if someone was in the bed; then he led her to the back room. The bed was small but sufficient. He laid his gun under his pillow, then got in bed.

Mei Li climbed into the bed next to him, laying her head on his chest. She started to cry. “This could be our last night.”

Welch kissed her forehead. “Not if I can help it.”

* * *

As tired as he was, he didn’t sleep well. He expected the Elgen to attack at any time, and he woke to every sound he heard, then stayed up, listening to the pattern of cars driving by, barking dogs, even the sound of Mei Li’s breathing. He had trained the men looking for him in how to track down a fugitive. He now wished that he hadn’t done such a good job.

* * *

The next morning Welch woke alone to the sound of the apartment’s front door opening. He sat up and grabbed his gun and held it at the door. Then he heard soft footsteps coming toward him, and the back room door opened. Mei Li stood in the doorway holding a plastic grocery sack. “Don’t shoot me,” she said, half smiling.

“Sorry,” Welch said, lowering his gun. “I didn’t hear you leave. You should have woken me.”

“You needed your sleep.”

“Where have you been?”

She lifted the grocery bag. “The market. I brought you hot dumplings and soy milk. Get dressed and come eat.” She walked back to the kitchen.

Welch put on his clothes, then came out. There was a *lung*, a woven bamboo steamer basket, on the table next to a shallow dish of soy sauce and chopsticks.

“You remembered that I like those,” Welch said as he sat down. He lifted the lid off the basket, and a cloud of pungent steam filled the air. “Hmm.”

“Yes, I remember.”

He lifted his chopsticks and picked up a dumpling, dipped it into the soy sauce, and then took a large bite. “That’s . . . remarkable.”

“Mr. Tsai at the market makes a *mean* pork dumpling.”

Welch laughed. He always laughed whenever Mei Li used an American idiom.

“Did I say that right? ‘Mean,’ it means ‘*Fei chang hau*,’ like ‘very good.’”

“Yes,” he said, still smiling. “You used it perfectly.”

“It is very strange that Americans sometimes say the opposite of what they mean.”

Welch smiled. “Yes, they do. Often. Was the market busy?”

“The market is always busy in the morning. It is our way. We do not like the big supermarkets like in America.”

“Did you see anything suspicious in town?”

“If you mean foreigners, no. Just some students.”

“How about police?”

“You think the Taiwanese police will be hunting you?”

“I know they will be. And your military. The Elgen have arrangements with both.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very. I helped make them. Hatch will tell them that I’m one of the terrorists involved with shutting down the Starxource plant. I’m certain that a picture of my face has already been circulated.”

Mei Li frowned. “I saw nothing unusual.”

“Is there an Internet café nearby?”

"I have Internet in my home."

"No, I don't want them to track us here."

"There is an Internet café at the end of the street near the phone store."

"Good. I can kill two birds with one stone."

She looked at him quizzically. "Why do you want to kill birds?"

"It's an American saying," he said. "It means I can do two things at once."

"*Multitask*," she said.

Welch laughed again. "Where did you learn that?"

"American television channel. That's where I learn most of my English slang words."

Welch fumbled with his chopsticks and dropped one of the dumplings into the dish of soy sauce, splattering the brown liquid all over himself. Mei Li stifled a laugh. "Americans have more trouble with chopsticks than the Chinese language."

"We have trouble with both," Welch said.

She walked to his side. "I have a question. How are you to get out of Taiwan? If Hatch has reported you as a terrorist, you will not be able to use your passport or you will be caught."

"I'm thinking I could charter a small plane or even a boat. It's only six hundred nautical miles to the Philippines."

"I could find you a boat," Mei Li said. "But then what will you do?"

"I need to get back to America." He rubbed his chin. "I'm going to need inside help for that."

"Who will help you? Who can you trust besides me?"

"There is no one besides you. I don't know anyone who isn't Elgen or who the Elgen know about." He paused, then said, "Except Michael Vey."

"Who is Michael Vey?"

"He's a Glow."

"What is a glow?"

Her question reminded Welch of how little Mei Li actually knew about his world or the Elgen. "Michael Vey is part of a group who is fighting the Elgen."

“You mean the terrorists who attacked the Starxource plant in Zuoying?”

“Yes.”

“They are bad people. You should not be with them. It is very dangerous.”

“They weren’t trying to shut down the plant. They were trying to rescue a little girl we had kidnapped.”

Mei Li looked upset. “You kidnapped a little girl?”

“The Elgen did.”

“I do not understand.”

Welch leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. “I know. There is much you don’t understand. It’s better that way.” He held her for a moment, then said, “We don’t have much time. The Elgen could already be on their way here. This morning I need you to get me money and phones.”

“You need more than one?”

“I’ll need six. I’ll go out with you.”

“Six phones? Why so many?”

“I can only use a phone once.”

“You can use a phone more than once. You can use it many times. It is not . . . *disposable*.”

“I’m saying, I should not use it more than once. The Elgen will be tracking all signals.”

“How much money will you need?”

“Fifty thousand dollars,” he said. “I’d take more, but that’s already enough to raise attention.”

“Are you going to wear the dress again when you go outside?”

“The burka? No. Not today.”

“Then you should bathe. You smell like sweat.”

Welch laughed. “Sorry, when you’re running for your life, personal hygiene takes a backseat.”

“Why a backseat?”

He waved his hand. “We’ll go after I shower.”

* * *

Forty-five minutes later Welch and Mei Li emerged from the apartment to the street below. Even though Welch was wearing a baseball cap and dark sunglasses, he still didn't dare walk with Mei Li. He wasn't willing to risk having her seen with him. She was in enough danger just knowing him, and in Taiwan, a country with a large population but little land, the Elgen had eyes everywhere.

They walked about a hundred yards to the phone store at the end of the road she lived on. While Mei Li purchased the cell phones, Welch waited for her in the Internet café next door.

The first thing he did was pull up the website for the Meridian, Idaho, newspaper's advertising department. He jotted down notes on a napkin someone had left at his table. He was careful not to access anything Elgen, as that's how he had found several of the electricians, including Michael and Taylor.

An hour and a half later, Mei Li walked past the café window. She glanced at Welch as if she didn't know him, then started back to her apartment. He let her walk for a minute until she was well ahead of him, then logged out of the computer, folded the napkin into his pocket, and walked back himself.

Mei Li was waiting for him at the door to her apartment. "Do you really think they're watching us?"

He walked inside before he answered. "I don't know, but it's possible. It's not worth the risk. Did you get everything?"

"Yes, six phones."

"And the money?"

"It took much time, but no problem."

"Good." He sat down at the kitchen table. "Do you have some writing paper?"

"Yes." She retrieved a spiral-bound notebook, and Welch began sketching.

"Why is it so important to the Elgen to find you?" Mei Li asked.

"Because I know too much. I know everything. Most of all, I know Hatch. He won't rest until he has my head on a pike."

"A pike is a fish?"

"It is, but that's not what I meant. A pike is also a stick with a sharp end."

“I am sorry. Sometimes my English . . .”

“Your English is excellent,” Welch said quickly. “A lot better than my Chinese.”

“Thank you,” she said. She watched him continue his work. “What are you drawing?”

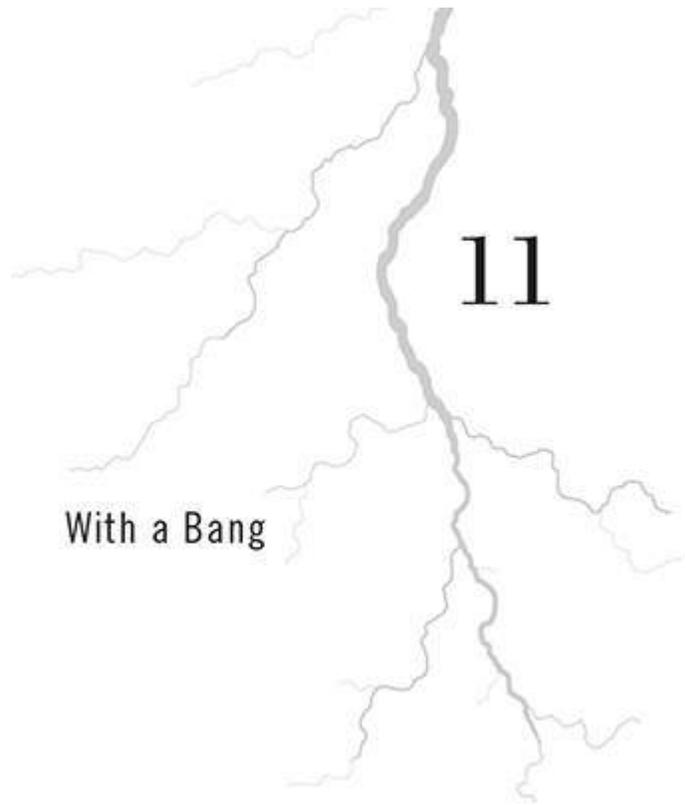
“An advertisement. Tonight I’ll scan it and send it to the newspaper.”

Mei Li looked at him quizzically. “What are you advertising?”

“For someone to rescue me. I’m sending a secret message to the Electroclan. I just hope someone is paying attention.”



PART FOUR



Hades Island (formerly Niutao), Tuvalu

Torstyn was tossing back and forth on his bed when he heard the pneumatic hiss of the lock on his cell door. He had been trying, unsuccessfully, to sleep for more than four hours—anything to escape the horror he felt. Making sleep even more difficult was his uncomfortable paper-fabric jumpsuit that made rustling sounds as he rolled in bed. That and the fact that the lights in his cell were always on as the cameras panned back and forth, scanning every inch of the room.

The Hades cells were patterned after the Purgatory in the academy, with some of Hatch's own "improvements." Worst of all, there was a flat-screen monitor built into the wall, and every fifteen minutes it

would automatically turn on to a scene of the frenzied rats in the bowl ripping the flesh off some animal or human.

Torstyn knew the scene hadn't come from Tuvalu, as the rats were mostly being fed bulls or cows. On Tuvalu, like Taiwan, the rats were fed fish. Still, the video had the desired effect. The constant shrieks of the rats had broken him down emotionally until he could no longer eat, and he kept breaking out in uncontrolled fits of sobbing. Torstyn had tried to use his power to blow the screen, as well as the lights and cameras, but couldn't. He was powerless in this room. The cell had been designed for Glows.

* * *

He had no idea what time or day it was when the door opened and Hatch, escorted by two guards, walked into his cell.

"Stand up," Hatch said sharply.

Torstyn looked at him coolly, without moving. Hatch had already ordered him to be fed to the rats, so he didn't have much more to fear. Or so he thought.

"Stand," Hatch said. He pointed a handheld RESAT at Torstyn and pulled the trigger.

A powerful wave of pain shot through Torstyn's body, forcing him to gasp out.

"All right. You win. But I can't stand with that on."

Hatch turned off the machine. "The next time you disobey an order, I'll leave it on until you beg to be fed to the rats. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Torstyn said, forcing himself to his feet.

As soon as he was standing, Hatch said, "Sit."

Torstyn did his best not to show his anger as he fell back down onto his bed. One of the guards set a chair down next to Hatch. Hatch slid it forward, then sat down across from Torstyn, his legs slightly spread.

"Leave us," Hatch said.

The guards turned and walked out. Now that Hatch was alone, Torstyn thought of physically attacking him but pushed the idea from

his mind. Hatch held his RESAT with the trigger in hand. All he needed to do was flip his finger.

“So, you’ve had time to regret your decision,” Hatch said softly.

“Yes, sir,” he said eagerly. Was Hatch thinking of freeing him?

“Of course you’re hoping that I have had a change of heart.”

You’d have to have a heart first. “Yes, sir. I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Hope can be such a cruel thing,” Hatch said. “Camus was right. From Pandora’s box, where all the ills of humanity swarmed, the Greeks drew out hope after all the others, as the most dreadful of all. . .”

Torstyn just gazed at him, trying to decipher his meaning.

“Unfortunately, for you, at least, what is done is done.” A bizarre frown twisted Hatch’s mouth, and his voice fell. “*You* are done. It’s already been announced to the troops that there will be a public feeding with you as the main course. They’ve already started the betting pools—you know the ones, you’ve participated in them. They’ll wager on exactly how long you’ll live before your heart stops, or how long your screams will last. I understand there is some wider speculation about this contest. Outside of Vey, we’ve never attempted to feed an electric to the rats before. But Vey was special, wasn’t he? Unfortunately, you don’t have the same power that he does. Unfortunate for you, at least. I’m actually fine with it.”

Torstyn just blinked.

“So the only question that remains, really, is not *if* it will end for you, but *how* it will end for you. Will you fade off into oblivion peacefully?” He paused. “I mean, of course, *comparatively* peacefully? Or in prolonged, horrifying agony?”

Hatch leaned forward, his hair falling over his dark eyes. “I’ve come to make you a deal. For old times’ sake. If you cooperate with me, I will see that you are anesthetized before going into the bowl. You will not feel those little mouths, bite by bite, eat away your life.” He took a deep breath. “I can also promise you that if you don’t cooperate, I will make sure that your vitals are well protected so that the furry little creatures will have to gnaw their way up your body cavity to end your life. Could you imagine what that would feel like? Rodents under your flesh? What could be more terrible?”

Torstyn tried not to show his fear but shuddered anyway.

“It was a medieval torture, you know. During the Inquisition, the torturer would place rats in a cage on top of a prisoner’s body, then put hot coals on top of the cage. The rats would burrow through the body to escape the heat. I can’t imagine how terrifying that would be. I’ve wondered what would be more painful, the rats or the horror itself. What do you think?”

Torstyn didn’t answer.

“No, I don’t suppose you’d care to conjecture. So I’ll continue with my offer. If you fail to help me, you will be terrifyingly aware of every rat’s bite. Your head and eyes will be caged, so you can see your own skeleton as the rodents strip the flesh from your legs and arms to the bones. You will witness your own slow consumption.” He leaned back. “So, traitor, what will it be? Cooperation or untold agony?”

“What do you want?” Torstyn asked.

Hatch leaned in. “What I want is Welch. Where is he?”

Torstyn just looked at him. “I don’t know.”

Hatch gazed at him for a moment, then, with an audible sigh, stood. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Torstyn said frantically. “We helped him off the boat. He got into a taxi with two guards. That’s all I know. I’m telling the truth.”

Hatch looked at him sadly. “That’s unfortunate for both of us, but especially for you.” As he walked to the door, the guards opened it for him. Hatch turned back. “Tara was more creative. She made up a story. I knew she was lying, of course, but I don’t fault her for trying. Fear is a powerful motivator.” The guards stepped to Hatch’s sides.

“If it makes you feel any better, in the words of Röhm, all revolutions devour their own children.” A strange, infantile smile crossed his face. He sang sweetly:

*“Red of the morning, red of the morning,
Thou lightest us to early death.
Yesterday mounted on a proud street,
Today a bullet through the breast.”*

Hatch stared into Torstyn's eyes. "You will be the first to go. You have fifteen days left to live. I suggest you use that time figuring out where Welch is." He walked out the door. The door hissed as the pneumatic lock sealed the cell after him. Torstyn fell over on the bed and sobbed.

* * *

After his visit to Tara and Torstyn, Hatch walked to the D corridor to visit Quentin, who had been released from Cell 25 just three days earlier.

Quentin was still in pain and was curled up in a fetal position on his cell's hard cot. His room was bare. He had no sheets, nothing he could hang himself with, not even his clothing, which, like Torstyn's and Tara's garb, was a pink, paper-fabric jumpsuit.

He had woken confused. He couldn't remember if it was the day he would be moved into the monkey cage. He thought he remembered a guard telling him that, but he couldn't remember or even be sure whether the guards were toying with him or not.

Ever since his stay in Cell 25 he had trouble keeping his thoughts together. Even with all the terror and humiliation of the monkey cage, he would still choose it over Cell 25. *How had Vey survived it?* Vey was a lot stronger than Quentin had given him credit for.

There was a loud burst of air, and Quentin looked up to see his door open. Hatch walked into Quentin's cell, leaving his guards outside.

"I came to see if you were ready to tell me about Welch."

Quentin looked away from him.

"I've been visiting with your partners in crime—the ones you've murdered by involving them in your plot. Not surprisingly, they are not doing well. It seems that they are afraid to die. Where you, on the other hand, would gladly die, wouldn't you?"

Quentin tightly closed his eyes.

"Cell 25 has that effect," Hatch said softly. "I went to see if they would tell me where Welch is. But they don't know, do they? Not that that would have spared them anything. Either way they will die a

horrible and ignominious death.” He walked closer to Quentin’s cot. “I would ask if you knew where he was, but I know you don’t—otherwise you would have told us in Cell 25. You have nothing to give me.”

“Then what do you want?” Quentin asked.

“I just wanted to see you.” Hatch sat down on the edge of Quentin’s cot. “And enlighten you.

“You might be wondering, why the monkey cage? I did not invent this torture, you know. I wish I had, but someone beat me to it. There is precedence for this. You’ll be glad to know you’re in good company.

“At the end of World War II, the Americans established an army disciplinary camp in Pisa, Italy. Right next to the famous leaning tower. At that time, the greatest attraction in Pisa was not the tower. It was an American traitor named Ezra Loomis Pound. Pound wasn’t just any American; he was one of the most famous poets in the world. He was a friend to Yeats. He collaborated with T. S. Eliot on his masterpiece ‘The Waste Land’—in fact, the book is dedicated to Pound. He even hung around with Ernest Hemingway. He learned boxing from him.

“He was an absurd little man, the pride of the world’s intelligentsia and the social elite. He was invited to all their fancy soirees. He once attended a London society party dressed in an all-green suit made from the felt of a billiard table.

“But none of that mattered after the war. He had betrayed his country. He, like you, was a traitor. To punish Pound for collaborating with the enemy, the Americans put him in a monkey cage. It didn’t take long for it to crack his beautiful mind.

“The uncultured American soldiers would stand next to the cage and listen to the madman rant in English, Italian, Chinese, French, and even some languages he made up. They didn’t realize that what he was ranting was the brilliant mental vomit of a genius, and what he said became some of the greatest poetry of his time:

*“The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant’s bent shoulders
Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,
Thus Ben and la Clara a Milano*

by the heels at Milano

. . .

*yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper,
with a bang not with a whimper, . . .*

“Ben and Clara were Benito Mussolini and his mistress, Clara, who were hung by their feet in Milano. The Possum was Pound’s nickname for his old friend T. S. Eliot. He was mocking Eliot’s poem ‘The Hollow Men.’” Hatch sighed. “This is how the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper.

“Imagine the sight of it, this brilliant cracked mind throwing his pearls to the swine. It was Pound who later declared, ‘All America is an insane asylum.’” Hatch looked at Quentin. “He was right, you know. Except he was too limited in his scope. The whole *world* is an asylum. And it needs a new director.

“Tomorrow you go to the cage. Perhaps there you too will find the insanity of genius.” A cruel smile crossed his face. “Or, then again, maybe just insanity.” Hatch walked to the door. “Eliot was right, not Pound. This is how the world ends, not with a bang, but a whimper.”

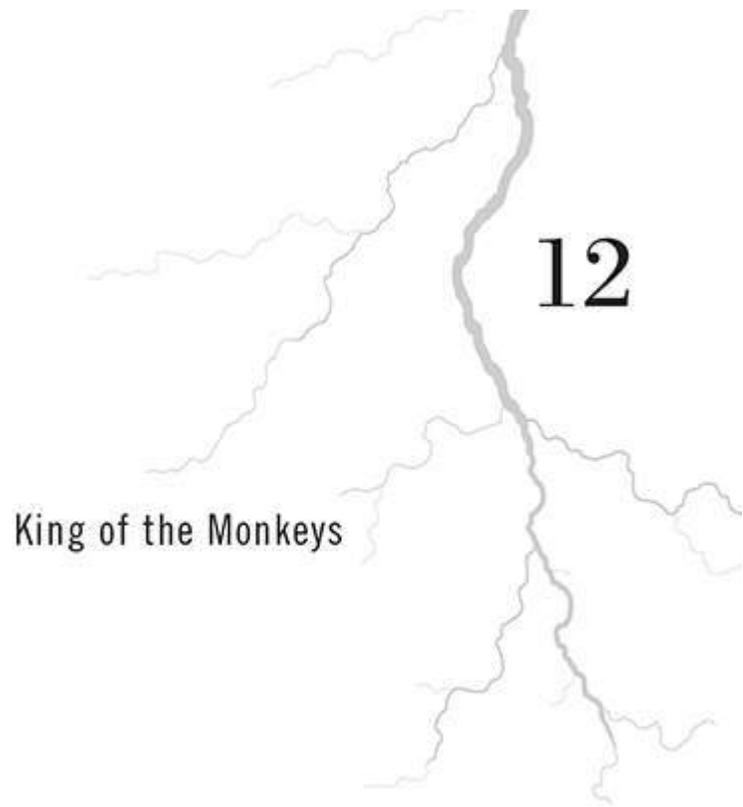
“There will be a bang,” Quentin said. “The sound of your fall after you’re brought down and made to pay for your crimes.”

“You’re delusional,” Hatch said. “Who can challenge me? Who can’t I buy off?”

“Michael Vey,” Quentin said. “He’s the good guy. I can see that now. And in the end he’s going to win.”

For just a moment Hatch’s arrogance flickered. Then his eyes narrowed. “Michael Vey is nothing. And in the end I will feed you his flesh.” He turned and walked out of the cell.

Quentin curled back up into a fetal position.



Early the next morning the lights turned on in Quentin's cell, signaling the start of a new day. Actually, a new life. A terrible life. Quentin wondered how long he would survive it.

He forced himself from his bed and walked over to the sink. For reasons he didn't understand he desperately wanted to brush his teeth—a strange desire, considering what was to come. He was shaking so hard, he had trouble holding the brush.

His heart froze when he heard the sharp, synchronized clicks of heavy boot steps coming down the hall, followed by the hiss of his cell door's pneumatic lock.

The door swung open. Quentin turned to see a guard step inside his cell. He wore the scarlet armband of a Zone Captain, just one level down from an EGG. Behind him was a lower-ranked Squad Captain in the purple Elgen uniform. The men were followed by twelve guards.

Hatch was noticeably absent. Quentin guessed that he was making a point by not being there. He was also making a point by sending a dozen guards when two would have been sufficient. In Quentin's present, weakened condition, one would have been enough. The guards were wearing dress uniforms, which meant that his internment would be a ceremony of sorts. There would be an audience at his encagement.

The Zone Captain spoke. "Quentin, face me."

Quentin slowly turned around. Since Cell 25, all his movements seemed slow. He looked the captain in the eyes.

"For acts of treason against Admiral-General Hatch and the Elgen politic, you have been sentenced to life internment in the eastern primate cage of the Hatch Center Square. Guards, take the prisoner."

Six of the guards rushed past the captain and surrounded Quentin. The Squad Captain stepped forward. "You are commanded to disrobe."

Quentin crossed his arms. There was usually humiliation involved in Hatch's punishment, but he wasn't going to allow it if possible.

The man looked him over, then smiled darkly. "Defiant? You can undress yourself, or my men will undress you. One way will be painful for you, one won't, but the end result is the same. I don't care which you choose."

Quentin took another deep breath, then took off his bright pink jumpsuit. "I never liked pink, anyway," he said, throwing the garment to the floor.

". . . And your underwear."

Quentin bristled. "He's keeping me naked like the prime minister?"

"The Prime *Monkey*," the Squad Captain corrected. "No, the general is being more merciful to you. He's sent you this." He lifted a loincloth—a simple square of thin brown fabric just slightly smaller than a washcloth. It had two leather straps to hold it to his waist. "Now undress."

Quentin pulled down his underwear. The Squad Captain tossed him the loincloth. Quentin caught it and tied it around his waist. Then he looked back up, his gaze meeting his enemy's. "Someday I will punish you. You *and* Hatch."

The Squad Captain laughed. “*General Hatch*,” he said. “And insanity usually sets in after you’ve been in the monkey cage, not before.”

“You’re the insane ones. And you’re following a madman.”

The Squad Captain’s eyes narrowed. “If you don’t think your general is merciful, consider that, unlike Prime Monkey Saluni, you still have your tongue. If you can’t be more judicious with it, I will happily relieve you of its burden.”

Quentin glared at him but kept his tongue. Literally. The Squad Captain nodded to the guards, who grabbed Quentin by the arms and cuffed his hands behind his back.

“Elgen guard, deliver the traitor to the square.”

* * *

The Funafuti Central Square was a half mile from the prison, and Quentin walked it barefoot and mostly naked. He was glad of just one thing: it was still early morning and there were few out to view his march.

The plaza, now renamed Hatch Center Square, was five acres of smooth, round cobblestone. In the very center, next to a flagpole, workers were erecting a fifty-foot marble column, which would eventually hold a bronze heroic-size statue of General Hatch. The project was behind schedule, and the original project manager had been sent to the rat bowl for incompetence.

On each side of the column was a large metal cage. The first cage Quentin was well aware of, as he’d passed it many times before. In addition to its primate inhabitants, it held the former prime minister Saluni. Attached to the bars of the cage was a metal sign that read:

PRIME MONKEY

The procession marched in front of the cage. Saluni was quietly huddled in one corner. He already looked more animal than human. He was pale and ill and had lost enough weight that his ribs seemed to stretch his skin. He was covered with filth and fleas and blood, as he

bore dozens of bite marks. He had been attacked by the monkeys, fighting for the alpha position of the cage. The prime minister appeared to have lost. Where he once led a nation, he was now subject to the cage's largest monkey.

Saluni watched the procession with dull, lifeless eyes, and Quentin quickly turned away from him. Quentin had once mocked the prime minister for his misfortune. Now Quentin could hear the echo of his cruelty returning to him.

As he passed, the tongueless leader let out a loud screech, and Quentin jumped. The pitiful, anguished cry filled him with terror. How long until he too was reduced to an animal?

The guard passed the marble column to a second cage, where a crowd of Tuvaluan natives was gathered. Baskets filled with rotted fruit and vegetables sat on the ground in front of them. It was a smaller crowd than Quentin expected, less than a hundred natives, and he thought they looked nearly as miserable as him. Many of them even looked away from the procession, as if they were embarrassed for him. Quentin had imagined that there would be a larger crowd, eager for revenge. But even those gathered didn't look as if they wanted to be there. It occurred to him that they'd been brought against their will.

The guards walked Quentin in front of the second cage and paused briefly for him to view it. The cage was filled with capuchin monkeys, who watched the parading humans with curiosity as they swung around on tree branches, whistling and screeching with excitement.

The cage stunk from the monkeys' droppings, which covered the cage floor. Quentin realized that he had been so worried about the cage itself that he had neglected to consider its occupants. He wondered, for the first time, if the monkeys would attack him.

The guards marched Quentin around to a large platform on the side of the cage. Quentin recognized the platform as the same one he had stood on as Hatch pronounced him king of the Hatch Islands. It was not a coincidence that the same platform was being used, and Hatch would have been pleased that the irony was not lost on Quentin.

There was a door on the side of the cage with a handwritten sign:

QUENTIN THE TRAITOR KING OF THE MONKEYS

An especially large guard stood next to the cage door, with a chain draped over his shoulder and a heavy padlock in his hand. One of the guards unlocked Quentin's cuffs and took them off.

Then the large guard opened the cage door. "Welcome to your new kingdom," he said solemnly, reciting the words he'd been assigned. "Rule it well."

Quentin looked warily at the monkeys who were already gathering near the door. He wished that he had Torstyn's or even Tara's powers. An EMP would do nothing to monkeys. For the first time ever he wished that he were Michael Vey.

"Go," the guard said.

In the lunacy of the moment, Quentin's mind drifted to something he had studied back at the academy: Dante's *Inferno*, Canto III.

Through me you pass into the city of woe:

Through me you pass into eternal pain:

Through me among the people lost for aye.

...

All hope abandon, ye who enter here.

"All hope abandon," Quentin mumbled to himself, unable to make himself go any farther.

"Step inside, or I'll throw you inside," the guard said gruffly.

Quentin took a deep breath, then walked up to the cage door opening and stepped inside, his bare feet squishing in the monkeys' feces.

"Your new *kingdom*," the guard said again, this time laughing. He shut the door behind Quentin, wrapped the chain around the bars of the gate, and then locked it, slipping the key into his pocket. "By the admiral-general's orders, though sick or dying, you will never set foot outside of this cage again."

The pronouncement sent chills through Quentin's body.

The guards, still in formation, stepped down from the platform, and the Zone Captain picked up a megaphone from the side of the

cage. "Citizens of Hatch Islands. Before you is a traitor to your country. Show him your displeasure."

The natives showed no displeasure nor interest whatsoever, but just stood there staring.

The Zone Captain lowered the megaphone and shook his head. "Idiots." He turned to his side. "Squad Captain. Show them the fruit."

The Squad Captain approached the people. "There's fruit here."

Still no one moved.

The Zone Captain growled, "Show the people what they're supposed to do with the fruit."

"Yes, sir." The Squad Captain walked over to one of the baskets and picked up an overripe tomato. Speaking slowly, he said, "You throw the fruit at the traitor. Like this." He turned and lobbed the tomato at Quentin, though he missed by at least twelve feet and hit a large, silver-haired capuchin monkey that screeched, then jumped to the opposite side of the cage, climbing the bars to the top.

The Zone Captain shook his head again. "Maybe we should get someone with a better aim."

"Sorry, sir." The Squad Captain picked up a rotten guava and walked up next to the cage and threw it, hitting Quentin on the calf. Then he walked back to the group, who still showed no interest.

"Now *you* pick up the fruit and throw it."

One of the older men stepped forward and lifted a papaya. He looked around, then took a bite of it.

"No!" the Squad Captain shouted. "Don't eat it! Throw it!"

The man looked at him curiously as he took another bite.

"They're mocking you," the Zone Captain said. He grabbed a machine gun from one of the guards and fired it just a few feet above the crowd's heads. Everyone fell to the ground. "Next time," he shouted, "I will aim lower! Now throw."

The frightened natives immediately began picking the fruit from the baskets and throwing it at Quentin, who cowered at the back of the cage, covering his face with his arms. Still, only a few pieces of fruit hit their mark. Quentin couldn't understand why they weren't trying harder to hit him. *After how he'd treated them, why would they*

show him mercy? Their lack of resentment was completely foreign to him.

After the baskets were empty, the Zone Captain angrily dismissed the crowd, which quickly vanished. All of the guards, except the one assigned to the cage, marched back to their posts. The ceremony was over. Only Admiral-General Hatch, who was watching the ceremony on a security screen in his office, and the monkeys found the event amusing.



PART FIVE



Christmas Ranch

It was a little after noon when Gervaso knocked on the door to Chairman Simon's office in the resistance's main ranch house.

"Who is it?"

"Gervaso. I need to talk to you."

"Come in," the chairman said.

Gervaso stepped into the small wood-paneled office.

The chairman looked up at him from his desk. "How are the kids?"

"Bored. Anxious. Exactly how they should be." Gervaso laid a piece of paper on the chairman's desk. It was a printed copy of a newspaper ad that had been cut out. "I think you should see this."

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Your Full-Service Electrical Experts

- Emergency Installations
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Serving the greater Meridian, Idaho, area for fifteen years.

Call 886-555-6423 ext.1

The chairman looked up. “Where did you get this?”

“Gabino, our mechanic up in Idaho, came across it in the *Idaho Statesman*. I had him e-mail it over.”

The chairman looked back over the ad, then up again. “Is it a relative of Michael’s?”

Gervaso shook his head. “There aren’t any other Veys in Idaho. In fact, there’s no such company as Vey Electric anywhere in the US.”

“Then what is this?”

“It was the name ‘Vey’ that caught Gabino’s eye, but there’s something even more peculiar about this. Look at the phone number. The whole state of Idaho’s area code is 208. This is an 886 number. I looked it up. Eight-eight-six is the country code for Taiwan.”

“Taiwan?”

“I think someone might be trying to get in touch with us. But it’s not just anyone. It’s someone who knows that Michael Vey is electric, and that makes it a very short list.” A more serious look crossed Gervaso’s face. “And then I found the hidden message.”

The chairman looked back down at the ad for a moment, then looked back up again. “I don’t see it.”

“Read the first letter of each line.”

He looked back down, reading each letter aloud. "E.L.G.E.N. S.O.S." He looked up with wide eyes. "It's a call for help."

"I think it's Welch. He's trying to reach us."

"Or it could be a trap."

"It could be, but the Elgen aren't usually that subtle. They don't have to be. I think whoever did this only wanted the right eyes to find it."

"Have you tried the number?"

"Not yet. I wanted to make sure that you were on board and ready to send a team to bring Welch back."

The chairman thought a moment, then said, "There's a good chance the Elgen have found this as well."

"That is a risk. Still, it's one I think we should take."

The chairman took a deep breath, then said, "Call the number."

* * *

Gervaso walked a hundred yards up the hill behind the main house to the water tower. He climbed the ladder to the top to make the call. The ringing had a far away, tinny sound.

"Vey Electric."

The voice answering was low and coarse. Gervaso thought it was a strange thing to hear the voice of his enemy.

"I found your message," Gervaso said.

"Whom am I speaking with?"

"A friend of Michael's. I presume you are Welch."

There was a brief pause; then the voice said, "We cannot speak long. I need your help getting out of Taiwan."

"Why would we help you?" Gervaso asked.

"Don't play this game. We both know I have information you need to bring down Hatch."

"How do we know we can trust you?"

"Just go online. You can see for yourself that Hatch has put a million-dollar bounty on my head. That's not something he can fake."

"We'll send a team to get you out of the country. Where are you?"

“Obviously I can’t say that over the phone. Create an e-mail address, and I will send you information. I’ll give you more information after you arrive on the island. I need to be careful for both of us.”

“Understood.”

“I’m going to give you another phone number. Do not lose it. It’s the only number where you will be able to reach me. Do you have something to write with?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

Welch gave him the number, then asked, “Is this number one I can reach you at later?”

“Yes. This is my personal number.”

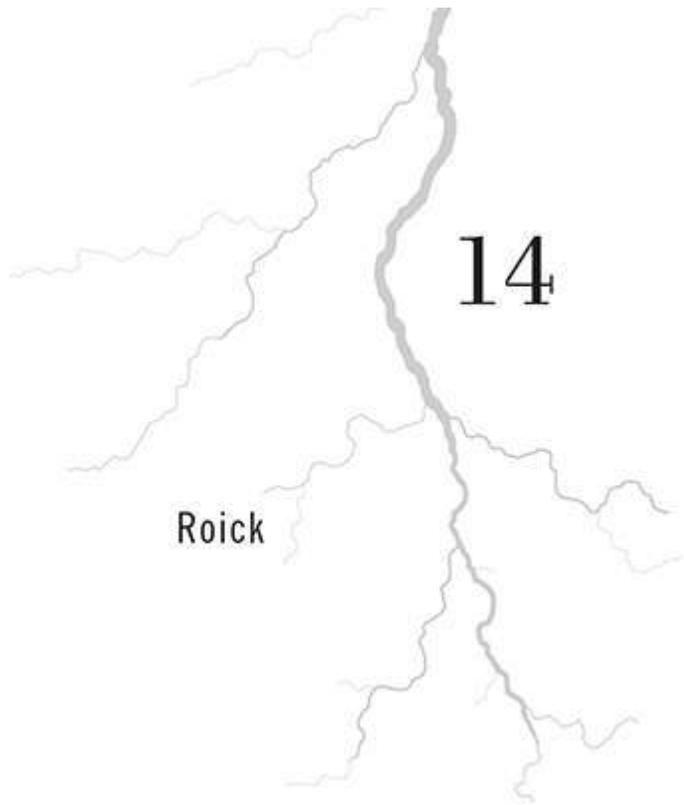
“I’ll be in touch tomorrow.”

“I’ll wait to hear from you. Good-bye.”

Welch hung up. Gervaso put the phone back into his pocket, then looked out over the sprawling ranch. The wind blew softly, and the tapping sound of a woodpecker echoed in the distance like a telegraph. Everything was so peaceful. *Not for long*, he thought. *Not for long.*



PART SIX



Nike, Tuvalu

“Admiral-General, sir, I have something to report.”

“Come in, Roick,” Hatch said. Dawid Roick was the first Polish recruit to the Elgen force and had risen quickly to the rank of Zone Captain. He was loyal, smart, and a fanatic for the Elgen cause, all qualities Hatch admired.

“Our spiders picked this up,” Roick said.

VEY ELECTRIC

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Hatch's eyes slowly panned over the ad. "Mr. Vey, what are you up to?"

"We don't believe it's Vey," Roick said.

Hatch looked up. "No?"

"We believe it's from someone trying to reach Vey. It's a code." Roick ran his finger along the bulleted line. "ELGEN SOS," he said. "The phone number listed isn't an Idaho number. It's the country code for Taiwan."

"Welch!" Hatch said. "It's Welch."

"That's what we're thinking."

"That means he has a phone. And if he has a phone, we can track him."

"Exactly. We wait until he uses it, triangulate it, and capture him. We've already begun. He's in central Taiwan near the city of Changhua."

"Does EGG Daines know about this?"

"Yes, sir. He's already assembled a team to capture him. We're just waiting for Welch to use the phone again to pinpoint his exact location."

Hatch sat back. "Tell Daines I want to be briefed in real time about his mission."

"Yes, sir."

"Well done, Roick. After Welch is captured, I'll see that you are amply rewarded. We do have a vacancy among the EGGs."

"Thank you, sir. It's my pleasure to be of assistance, sir."

As Roick walked out of the office, Hatch smiled. "I've got you, Welch. You fool. I knew I'd get you. Once again, you've failed."



The Elgen's cellular triangulation revealed that Welch was hiding out at a farm in the small Taiwanese farming village of Dazhu, along Taiwan's western coast. The village was built near a hilly valley stepped with rice patties. It was a remote location, primitive, about five miles outside of the main city of Changhua.

For Daines, it was a perfect place to attack. The only possible escape route was a small bamboo forest to the east, which was where the Elgen would create their line. If Welch chose to run, he'd be forced out into the open and gunned down.

Hatch wasn't taking any chances with losing Welch again. He personally alerted the Taiwanese army that he had located one of the terrorists who had brought down the Taiwanese Starxource plant. He also arranged for the Taiwanese Coast Guard to patrol the coast and supply a guard unit of a hundred men to supplement the eight squads of guards under the command of EGG Daines.

Those were only precautions. Hatch had complete confidence in Daines—he was as efficient as he was ruthless and had proven himself a skilled hunter of beast and men. Daines had been born in South Africa and, as a child, had learned the Zulu method of hunting lions. The native warriors would fan out in a large V formation armed with only leather-capped drums, which they pounded fiercely as they marched forward.

As they moved through the brush, the lion would run away from the sound to where hunters would be waiting with spears or, in later years, high-powered rifles. Daines's plan for catching Welch was roughly the same. The Taiwanese soldiers would, in a V formation, advance on one side of the farmhouse, forcing Welch into the waiting ambush of heavily armed Elgen guards.

The key was to make him run. A man holed up in a fortification can dig in for days, but a man on the run is exposed, vulnerable, and more likely to make rash, poor decisions.

* * *

Daines's force moved quickly as it surrounded the farmhouse. Drones, snipers, and men with high-powered binoculars watched every inch of the farm. Welch couldn't go anywhere without being seen. In addition, they were tracking his phone. Daines, who was positioned in a jeep at a vantage point a hundred yards away, was watching a monitor with a green dot designating Welch's phone's location. It was currently moving from side to side inside the farmhouse.

Daines said to Hatch over his handheld radio, "Sir, we've got the target located and surrounded. We're ready to move."

"Then move," Hatch said. "Bring me his head."

"Roger that," Daines said. He set down his radio and turned to his lieutenant. "Move in."

"Yes, sir." He spoke into his radio. "The guard will advance."

The staggered line of Taiwanese soldiers began closing in on the farmhouse.

After a minute Daines radioed his advance team. "Can you see any movement from the house?"

“Nothing,” a voice replied. “A couple dogs just ran out of the house.”

“They must have heard us.” Daines looked down at his monitor. “Are you sure you see nothing? There’s target movement on my monitor.”

“No, sir.”

“Could there be an underground tunnel?”

“No, sir. We’re surrounded by rice paddies.”

“We need to move in faster. Secure the facility. Let no one past you.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Daines watched his troops close in around the farmhouse, the green dot on his monitor suddenly passed through the army’s line.

“Captain!” Daines shouted into the radio. “Welch has just crossed your lines and moved outside your circle. He’s behind you.”

“Unless he’s invisible, that’s impossible. Give me coordinates.”

“Five, two-three-four, seven. Is he disguised as a soldier?”

“There is no human at those coordinates.”

“Well, something just walked through your lines.” Daines pulled out his gun and turned to his driver. “Go!”

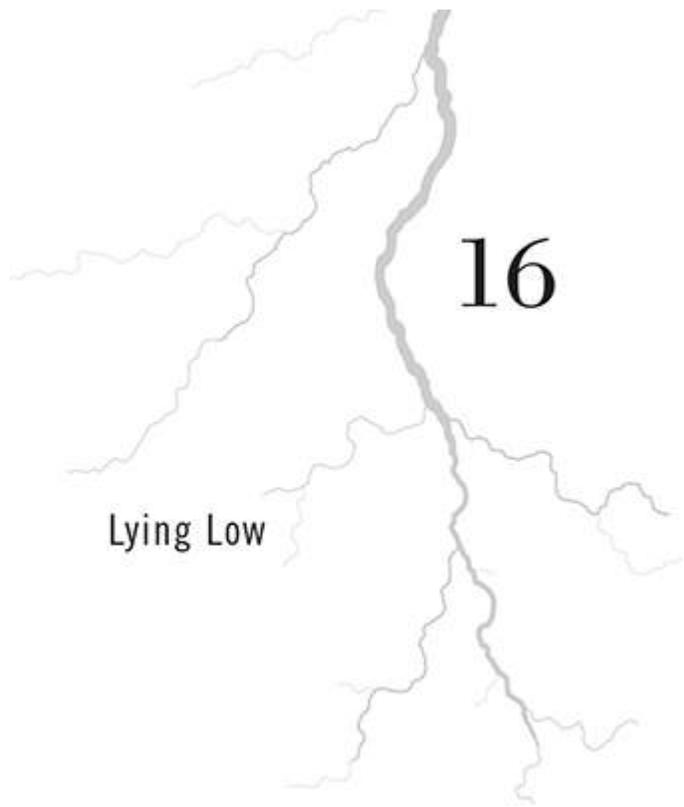
The driver followed Daines’s directions until he shouted again, “There! He’s stopped in that clearing.” Daines jumped out of the truck, holding out his gun. “Cover me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Daines walked around the brush, expecting to surprise Welch. Instead, all he found was a small, underfed dog lapping at the water in the rice paddy. It docilely looked up at him as he approached. The dog had silver duct tape wrapped around its torso.

“What have you got there?” Daines said, squatting down next to the animal. There was a rectangular, boxlike lump under the tape. Daines ran his hand over it, then let out a deep breath. “Welch, you clever devil.”

Welch’s cell phone was strapped to the dog’s back. Unbeknownst to them, Welch was already in the center of Changhua.



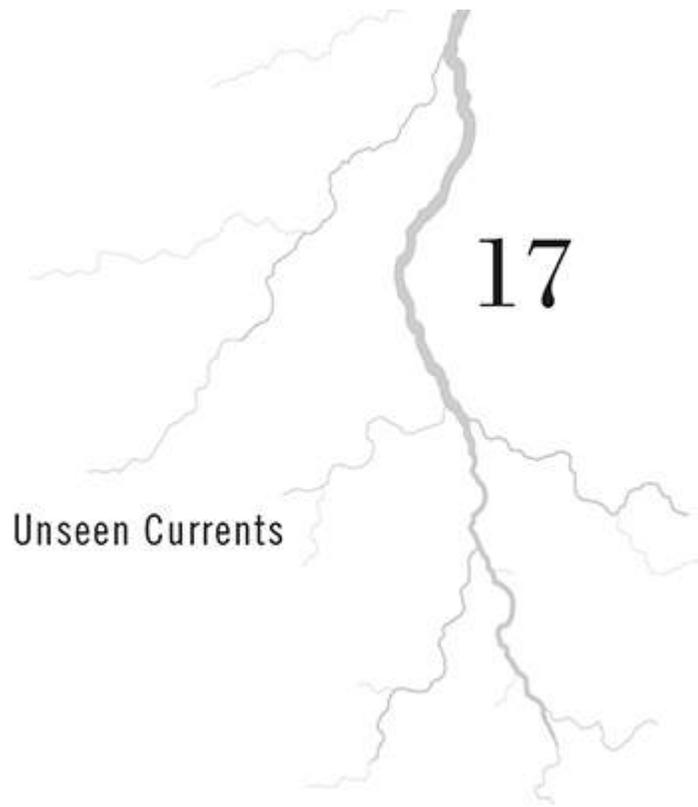
By the time the Elgen had reached Changhua, Welch had used four of the six cell phones Mei Li had purchased for him. He would use each phone only once, then discard it, usually attaching it to a random vehicle or animal. One he had placed inside the bumper of a bus headed north to Taipei, another on a frozen-fish delivery truck. His first phone he had taped to the dog in Changhua.

It was the same phone that Gervaso had called to contact him. For the time being, Welch had taken the batteries from the last two phones. He wouldn't need them for a few more days—not until the Electroclan arrived in Taiwan. Until then he would lay low in a small apartment Mei Li had found and stocked with food and water.

Still, he was anxious. He just hoped the Electroclan found him before the Elgen did.



PART SEVEN



Michael Vey at Christmas Ranch

My life has taught me that nothing in this world stays the same. Nothing. Not me. Not even you. The sooner you accept this, the sooner you can figure out how to live your life. Maybe even enjoy it.

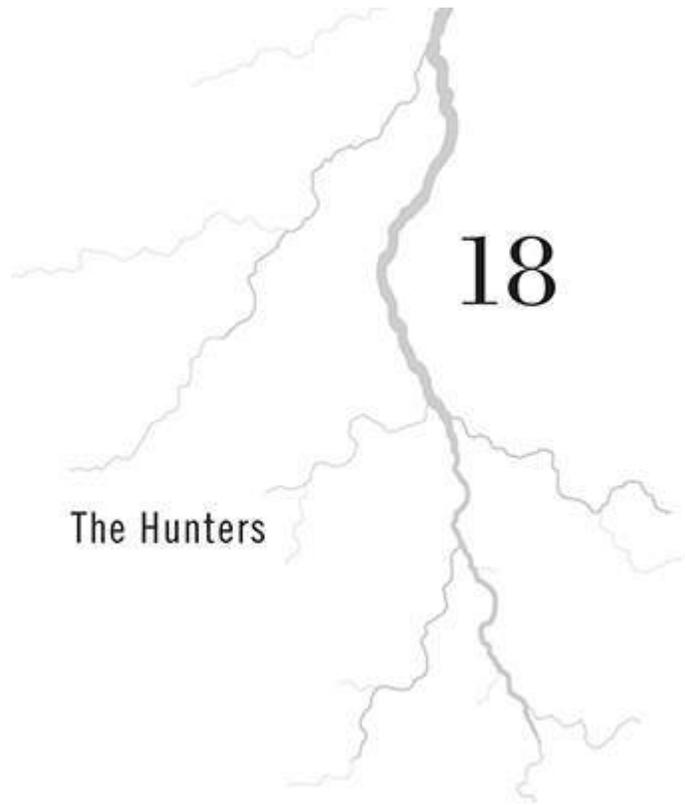
Two things I know about change. First, sometimes it seems like we're just bobbing up and down in the ocean trying to keep our heads above water, when really we are being moved along by unseen currents, imperceptibly being dragged to some distant shore.

Second, it pretty much always hurts.

I keep reminding myself of this, because while the world we live in is changing, so are our hearts and minds. Things that are important now won't be important later. And things that aren't important now

will be super-important later. It's true for everyone. You start out thinking you're going to be some kind of person and that life is laid out and as predictable as a video game. Then you realize that the rules have changed. There are characters in your game you didn't plan on. There are things you have to do that you never wanted to do. And sometimes the purpose of the game seems to change. I suppose it's like that for everyone. Everyone must come to the realization that the life they have and the life they thought they'd have aren't ever the same thing. And then the question is, what are they going to do about it?

I suppose that's what Hatch and the Elgen are about. Change. Evolution. Or de-evolution. Oh, I guess there's one more thing I know about change. Not everything changes for the better.



It was a Sunday, I think. I wasn't sure. Since arriving at the ranch, it had been hard to keep track of what day it was. The sun was setting over the western hills of Kane County, casting the ranch in a rose-gold hue, which, in spite of all the fear I carried, was still beautiful.

After dinner, Taylor and I grabbed a couple of quilts from my bunkhouse and walked down to the pond. We lay the blankets flat on the wooden dock that hung out over water that had been dyed blue-green so it looked more like water from the Bahamas than a cow pond.

The sun had fallen during our short walk, and the canyons to the east were bright pink with the sun's last offering. We lay down next to each other.

"It's so beautiful," Taylor said.

I pointed toward a large stone outcrop. "See that ridge right there, that juts out? It's called Queen's Throne."

"How do you know that?"

"Ostin," I said.

"Ostin," she repeated. "Of course Ostin knew."

"Just past that is the city of Kanab. They used to shoot a lot of old Western movies there. They call it 'Little Hollywood.'"

"Ostin again?"

I nodded. "He knows everything."

We looked out over the horizon in silence. The canyons changed as the sun fell more and shadows crept up from the plateau's jagged foothills like a rising hand.

I swatted at a moth that was fluttering in front of my face. Being outside at night at the ranch was a problem. As the sun set, the insects were attracted to our glows, but especially mine, which now seemed to be getting brighter almost daily. I felt like a glowstick. Or, more accurately, a bug zapper. (An Electrical Discharge Insect Control System, as Ostin would call it.) The truth is, I didn't need to swat at the bugs. They'd disintegrate as soon as they landed on my skin. I just didn't like the powder marks and the smell of burning insects on my body.

"Your glow is getting brighter," Taylor said.

"I'm still getting more electric."

"Does that worry you?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure what it means." I looked at Taylor. "I find myself still worrying about that lie Hatch told me at the academy about some of the electric children dying of cancer."

"He uses fear and lies to control people."

"The thing is, I know it's a lie. So why do I still think about it?"

"A lie can exist in your mind even when you know it's a lie. That's why you should never stop challenging your beliefs."

I looked out over the pond. A fish jumped. "You're right."

"It's so peaceful out here," Taylor said. She was tracing the fernlike scars on my arm with her fingernail.

"They're weird, aren't they?" I said.

“I like them. I always have.” She was quiet a moment more, then said, “I’m afraid of this mission. I have a bad feeling about it.” She looked up into my eyes. “Are you afraid?”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah. Like out of my skull afraid.”

“Then why are we doing this? Why don’t we just stay here?”

“Because eventually the Dark Lord will reach the Shire,” I said. Taylor looked at me peculiarly. “I mean the battle will come here, too.”

“Then let it,” she said. “Let them come to us.”

“By the time it reaches us, it will be too late. We’ll have no chance at all.”

She sighed. “You’re right. I don’t like it, but I know you’re right.” She went back to tracing on my arm. “Is everyone coming?”

“So far.”

“Even Grace?”

“No. She’ll be helping from back here. She’d just be another person we’d have to watch out for.”

“My parents are freaking out about this. My father doesn’t want me to go.”

“When did he say that?”

“Last night. He said we just got back together and he’ll never let me out of his sight again.”

A part of me was glad to hear this. The protective part of me didn’t want her to go, even though I honestly didn’t think we could succeed without her.

“This morning I heard him telling the chairman that this was a suicide mission and he couldn’t believe the chairman would send a bunch of kids to their deaths.”

“What did the chairman say?”

“He said that we aren’t just a bunch of kids. That we’re not only gifted, we’re smart.”

“That describes us,” I said sardonically.

“Then he said he knew it was dangerous, but these are dangerous times.” She hesitated. “No, he said *desperate* times. And desperate times require desperate measures.”

“So we’re a desperate measure,” I said.

“Apparently.” She frowned. “You know what’s really weird? My brothers in college have no idea what’s going on. My father hadn’t even told them that my mother was arrested.”

“How would you even begin to explain things to them?”

“I have no clue. Especially since they probably think our parents are dead.” She shook her head. “They don’t even know I’m electric.” Taylor’s frown deepened. “Do you think that the Elgen would hunt down my brothers?”

I didn’t want to tell her what I really thought. The truth was, I was surprised that the Elgen hadn’t found them already. “I don’t know,” I finally said. “So what are you going to do about the mission?”

“What do *you* want me to do?”

I thought for a moment, then breathed out slowly. “I want you to be safe. I want you to be a million miles away from Hatch and the Elgen.”

“That would put me on the sun.”

I grinned. “The sun is ninety-three million miles from the Earth.”

She grinned back. “Really, Ostin?”

“Sorry. I am starting to sound like him.”

“One Ostin’s enough.” She laughed. “Actually, one is *more* than enough.”

“My point is, I don’t care how far you are from Hatch, just as long as he can’t find you.”

“So you don’t want me to go?”

I again hesitated. “I want you to be safe. But I don’t know if we can do it without you. I know I can’t. You saved my butt at least ten times.”

“You’ve saved mine, too,” Taylor said softly. “Don’t worry. I know you need me. And I’m not a kid asking my mommy and daddy for permission anymore. I left all that back in Idaho. My dad still doesn’t understand the big picture. He still believes that things can go back to the way they were and we can be a cozy, innocent little family. What he wants right now doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is whether or not it’s the right thing.” She touched my face. “You taught me that.”

“If we don’t stop the Elgen, they’ll just grow more powerful. The longer we wait, the more dangerous they become. Like python eggs.”

“Exactly. Easy to crush, but let them hatch and grow, and they’ll crush you.”

Let them Hatch, I thought.

“There’s something else I don’t know what to do about. . . . I mean, in case we don’t make it back,” Taylor said.

“What’s that?”

“I know what Jade Dragon knows. I mean, I don’t understand it, but I could recite it all. Should I tell them?”

I swatted at another moth. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t trust the resistance?”

“I don’t know if I trust them with *that*.”

“But we’ve trusted them with our lives.”

“It’s not the same. Even if they weren’t our friends, our lives are important to them. But this is different. Some information is too tempting. It’s like, I’ve never stolen anything before, but if you told me that there’s a million dollars, unguarded, in a box behind the school, I might consider taking it. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.”

“What if someone decides that it’s a good idea to beat Hatch at his own game by creating their own electric civilization?”

“Someone? You mean, the resistance?”

I nodded. “We don’t really know much about the voice, do we? What I do know is that that much power in one person’s hands is too much. Besides, they know where to find Jade Dragon.” I kissed the top of Taylor’s head. “There will be time to figure this out after we come back.”

She nodded. “*After* we come back.” She cuddled back into me. We lay there quietly on the quilt with my arms around her, and her head on my chest. She felt so good. So warm and soft. In spite of the mess of my life, I still felt lucky. If my electricity had brought me nothing but Taylor, it was worth it. I couldn’t imagine loving anyone more than I loved her.

Then Taylor lifted her head and looked at me. “There’s something else I want to tell you. But I’m afraid.”

I leaned up on one elbow. “Why would you be afraid?”

“I don’t want you to think I’m crazy.”

“I know you’re crazy,” I said.

She punched my shoulder. “No, I’m serious. It’s weird.”

“So? I’m weird. Tell me.”

She took a deep breath. “How do I begin?” She hesitated a moment, then said, “I read something the other day that said we only use ten percent of our brains. Except, like Ostin, he probably uses like ninety percent, but this article said that if we could use all of our brains, we would not only be able to read minds, but we’d be able to see the future.” She looked at me intensely. “I thought it was interesting that they made the connection of mind reading to seeing the future. What do you think of that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know how you could know something that hasn’t happened. But I don’t know if time is really the way we think it is. Ostin once tried to explain to me Einstein’s theory of relativity and how time warps. I didn’t get it. He also said that Stephen Hawking said that he couldn’t understand why we couldn’t remember the future, so maybe if our brains were powerful enough, we could.”

“So you think that it might be possible to tell the future?”

“Yes. I mean, people have made predictions before, like prophets and Nostradamus and stuff.” I looked into her eyes. “Why?”

“Something is happening to me. I keep having dreams. But they don’t feel like dreams, they feel real. Almost like memories. And they come true. At least they have so far.”

“What kind of dreams?”

She sat up, pulling back from me a little. “Like, right after we escaped the Starxource plant in Taiwan, I had a dream that all these black dragons were flying over Timepiece Ranch and then they started breathing fire over it until everything was burned to ashes. After it was over, there was one dead dragon on the ground.

“And when we got there, that’s what we saw—the ranch was completely burned up and there was one crashed helicopter on the ground.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about your dream?” I sat up too.

“I didn’t think it mattered then. I mean, we were facing real nightmares in Taiwan. But then I had another dream. The night after we met up with Gervaso in the Gadsden, I had a dream that my mother was in a cage and my father was walking around it dressed in his police uniform. I asked him why he didn’t let her out, and he said, ‘Because she stole you.’ I said, ‘How could she steal me, I’m right here?’ and he said, ‘No one can see you, so the police won’t let her go.’” Taylor exhaled slowly. “Then, just a few days later, we find out that my mother had been arrested by the Boise police and charged with my disappearance.”

“That’s weird,” I said, not sure what to say. Taylor looked upset.

“I don’t know what to make of it.” She looked me in the eyes. “Am I, like, psychic?”

“Maybe we should talk to Ostin about this. I’m sure he’ll know something about this.”

Taylor put her hand on my arm. “I don’t want anyone else to know. At least not yet.”

“Okay,” I said. “Anyway, if it’s true, then it’s a good thing. We’ll have an idea of what’s going on.”

“Yeah, if we knew what my dreams meant. Like, last night I had a dream that my father grew antlers like a deer and was running around the ranch being chased by hunters. Then one of them shot him.”

“Were they Elgen?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, it was like they were just . . . hunters.”

Just then the serenity was broken by the sound of three gunshots—the sharp recoil echoing through the surrounding hills.

“What was that?” Taylor asked.

“Gunshots.” My worst fear flooded in. *What if the Elgen has found us?*

“We’d better go see,” I said. I looked to the hill south of us, where the water tower and sentry were. “It came from over there.”

Leaving our blankets, we ran up the north bank of the hill toward the water tower. It wasn’t easy in the dark, as our path was lit only by a rising moon.

We had run nearly two hundred yards from the pond when we reached the top of the hill. We were both out of breath, and my face

was ticking like crazy. We stopped next to the water tower to rest.

The water tower was nearly thirty feet high, with a three-thousand-gallon water tank and an observation deck on top that was usually manned by a lookout, but wasn't now.

"Isn't there supposed to be someone—"

"Shh," I said, raising my hand. I could hear voices below us. "They're down there," I whispered, looking toward the base of the southern slope.

The hill was cast in dark shadows and covered with cedar and juniper, which gave us good cover as we hurried down. We pulled our sleeves over our hands so the only visible glow was on our faces.

At the base of the hill, on the dirt road that paralleled the corral leading to the main house, was a group of five or six men.

"Are they Elgen?" Taylor asked.

"I can't tell. Let's get closer."

As we neared the road, I could see that the two men with their backs to the ranch were Chairman Simon and Taylor's father. In front of them were four men with rifles.

"That's my dad," Taylor said, starting to stand. I grabbed her.

"Stay down. They aren't Elgen, but they've got guns."

"They're hunters," Taylor said. "What are they doing out so late?"

"Let's get closer."

About twenty feet from the road there was a fallen juniper with its roots extending high enough that we could hide behind it. We crept the final few feet, carefully picking our steps to not make any sound. As we reached the tree, we could clearly see the chairman and Mr. Ridley and the four men dressed in hunting gear. The hunters looked angry, and there was obvious tension. Mr. Ridley also looked angry. The chairman was speaking.

"I don't *care* where the elk ran. This is private property. You need to turn around and go back to where you came from."

One of the hunters laughed, then mumbled something. It sounded to me like he had been drinking.

"Listen, joker," one of the hunters said. "I got a shot on that elk, and I'm claiming it."

The chairman crossed his arms. "You can claim all you want, but this is private property. You can't trespass."

Another one of the men spoke, his words slightly slurred. "We chased it here. If we're in chase, we can continue. It's the law."

"That's only a law for police in pursuit," Mr. Ridley said. "I'm a cop. And I'm giving you ten seconds to turn around and get your hairy hides out of here."

The men looked at each other; then two of them leveled their guns at Ridley. "What kinda stupid are you? We're in the middle of nowhere, you got four men with guns, and you're telling them to leave? Maybe I'll just bag—" The man suddenly stopped, and his rifle drooped until it was pointing at the ground.

I looked over. Taylor was reaching toward him, rebooting him. Then he reached up and grabbed his forehead. Actually, it looked more like he was clawing it, as if there was something inside it that he was trying to get out.

Seeing the man's helplessness, Mr. Ridley rushed him, grabbing the barrel of the rifle. One of the other hunters pulled a large bowie knife from a sheath on his belt, and the other two lifted their guns.

"Stop it!" I shouted.

There was a rifle blast, and Mr. Ridley fell to the ground.

"They shot my father!" Taylor shouted, jumping up and running toward the men. One of the hunters, startled, wheeled around toward us with his gun.

"Taylor!" I shouted again. Before the hunter could pull the trigger, I pulsed, and a massive blue-gold wave of electricity exploded, knocking Taylor, the chairman, and all four of the hunters to the ground.

I ran to Taylor while the chairman crawled over next to Mr. Ridley. In the dark I could see something black around Mr. Ridley's stomach. I froze. It was like Wade all over again. Even in the dark I could see that Taylor's eyes were wild.

"Get help!" the chairman shouted to me, pulling up Mr. Ridley's shirt and pressing down on his torso. "Get Dr. Benton. Tell Gervaso we need the helicopter. Fast."

Taylor was still dazed but got up onto her knees. "Get my mom."

“All right,” I said. “You’re going to have to keep rebooting these hunters until I get back. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be right back.” As I ran down the hill toward the house, Jack, Ian, and Zeus came running out the back. Jack and Zeus carried flashlights.

“Over here!” I shouted, though Ian had already seen me.

“We need Dr. Benton and the helicopter,” I shouted again. “Where’s Gervaso?”

“I’ll get both of them,” Zeus said, heading back into the house.

“Get Abigail too,” I shouted after him.

Jack and Ian ran past me up the road.

Just then Mrs. Ridley rushed out of the house with my mother.

“What happened?” my mother asked.

“Mr. Ridley’s been shot!” I shouted.

Mrs. Ridley looked at me with panic.

“Where is he?” Mom asked.

“Up the road a hundred yards. Follow me.”

I turned and ran back, suddenly worried about Taylor being alone with the hunters. Somewhere in the distance I could hear the sound of a helicopter powering up.

When I got back, Jack and Ian were kneeling on the ground next to Mr. Ridley and the chairman. Behind them the hunters were all on the ground rolling around, moaning in pain. I don’t know what Taylor was doing to their brains—I’m not sure that she did either—but I’d never seen her more focused or intense. Then two of them started screaming, “Stop, please!”

“Taylor,” I said.

She didn’t respond.

“Taylor! Back off!”

She turned and looked at me. Her eyes were crazy and angry.

“Back off,” I said, panting. “You’re hurting them.”

“I know.”

I took her arm. “Come on.” We both turned toward her father. He was now shaking. “Jack, can you watch the hunters?”

Jack nodded. He handed Taylor his flashlight and picked up one of the men's guns, checked its chamber, and then held the gun on them. "Which one of you scumbags shot Chuck?"

"That one," Taylor said, pointing the flashlight at one of the men on the ground.

Jack leveled the gun at the man's chest. "No one messes with family. Any of you try anything, pig-face goes first. Then I shoot the rest of you."

I doubt the men even knew what Jack was saying, as they were still too disoriented to even speak. Taylor had really messed with their brains.

Mrs. Ridley reached us, followed by my mom, Zeus, and Abigail. Mrs. Ridley was crying. "What happened? Is he okay?"

"He's lost a lot of blood," the chairman said. "I think he's going into shock. Taylor, can you shine your light over here?"

Mrs. Ridley knelt down next to her husband. "Chuck. Stay with us. Don't leave us."

Abigail knelt down and put her hand on Mr. Ridley's shoulder. His shaking body suddenly calmed.

"That's good," the chairman said. "It will slow his heart rate. Ian, what do you see?"

"Not good. There's a lot of blood. It's filling his stomach."

About a hundred feet from us the helicopter began to lower into the corral.

My mother, the chairman, and Ian moved between the corral and Mr. Ridley to block the dust being kicked up by the helicopter's rotors. Dr. Benton ran up and knelt down next to Mr. Ridley. "What happened?"

"He was shot in the stomach."

"It's filling with blood," Ian said.

Dr. Benton took Mr. Ridley's wrist to check his pulse. "We need to stop the bleeding and get him to the hospital."

"Maybe McKenna could cauterize it," Mrs. Ridley said.

"McKenna's at the other house," Ian said. "She's too far away."

"Michael could do it," my mother said.

"What do I do?" I asked.

“I can guide you,” Ian said. “Stick your finger into the bullet hole and burn it shut.”

“My fingers are dirty.”

“The heat of your electricity will kill the germs,” the doctor said. “Infection is the least of our worries right now.”

Mr. Ridley groaned.

“We’ve just got to buy him enough time to get him to the hospital in Kanab.”

“The helicopter is ready,” Gervaso said, running up to us.

The chairman moved aside, and I knelt down next to Ridley. “Abi?”

“I got him.” She closed her eyes. I could see her begin to tremble from the pain. I looked down at the mass of blood. The bullet wound was about the diameter of a dime and slightly ragged. I grimaced as I shoved my finger into the hole.

“How far?” I asked Ian.

“More. Push harder.”

I pushed in, my knuckles pressing into his abdomen. I could feel the blood, thick and sticky around my finger.

“Now,” Ian said.

I pulsed. Mr. Ridley’s body tensed, and in spite of Abigail’s help he still groaned out. I could feel his blood boil against my finger. The pungent stink of burning blood filled the air.

“I think it’s working,” Ian said. “I think it stopped.”

I pulled my finger out and leaned back.

“Yeah, it stopped,” Ian said.

“Let’s get him to the helicopter,” Gervaso said.

Gervaso, Dr. Benton, and Ian lifted Mr. Ridley and carried him to the helicopter.

“Can I go with him?” Mrs. Ridley asked.

The chairman said, “The chopper can carry two passengers. You and . . .” He looked at Abigail. “Abigail should go.”

The two women ran toward the helicopter.

“What about me?” Taylor asked.

“Gervaso will drive,” the chairman said. “It will only take twenty minutes.”

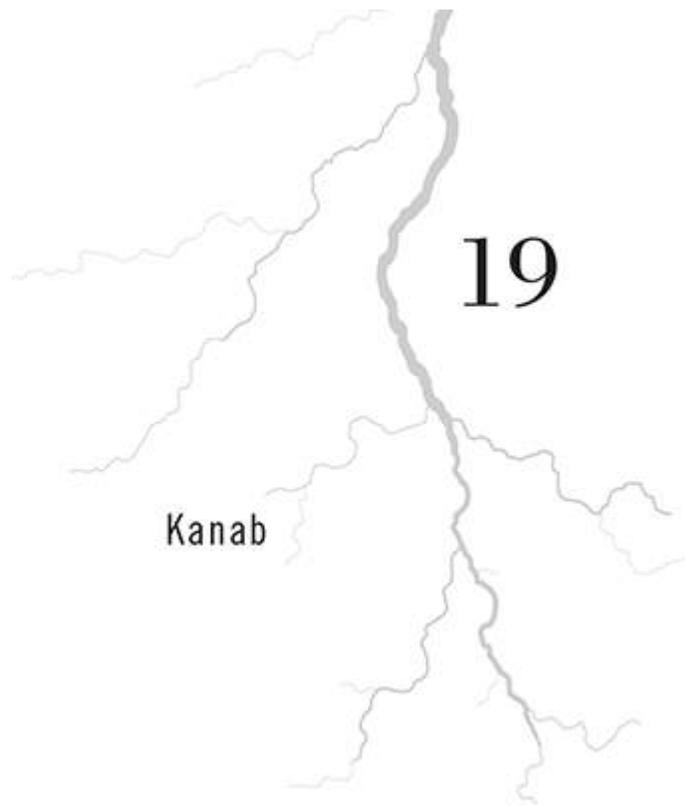
“I’ll go with you,” I said.

“What about these clowns?” Jack asked, waving the gun at the hunters.

The chairman looked at them with disdain. “Blindfold them; then take them down to the lower barn and handcuff them to the wall. We’ll deal with them after we get back from the hospital.” His eyes narrowed. “If they try to escape, shoot them.”

“I’ll fry them first,” Zeus said. “Extra crispy.” He walked over to them. “Stand up, losers.”

I took Taylor’s hand. “C’mon, let’s get to the hospital.”



The city of Kanab is a little more than twenty-five miles from Christmas Ranch, though with Gervaso's driving, it seemed closer. Because of the hour there was little traffic, and Gervaso instructed Ian to keep a sharp lookout for deer so he could drive insanely fast. At one point I looked at the speedometer, and he was going a hundred and twenty-seven, faster than I thought the truck could even go.

We passed a highway patrolman a few miles from the junction, but even before Gervaso could say anything, Taylor took care of it. The car's lights turned off and the car rolled to a stop. She was at least a hundred yards away from the vehicle when she did it. My first thought was that she was getting better at rebooting. More likely her power was enhanced by the intensity of her emotions.

Taylor didn't say a word the whole way, and as we got closer to the hospital, the mood in the car just got more and more tense. We all

knew that there was a chance that Mr. Ridley hadn't made it to the hospital alive. I couldn't stop gulping.

* * *

Gervaso screeched to a stop in front of the hospital's emergency entrance, and Taylor jumped out and ran inside. I ran out after her. The large admitting room was mostly vacant. Abigail was reclined in a chair next to the door. Her armpits were wet, and blood was spattered all over her blouse. She looked so exhausted, I doubted she could stand.

"What's going on?" Taylor asked.

"They're still in there," Abigail said.

"Then he made it alive," Taylor said.

Gervaso and Ian walked in, looking around anxiously.

"He's alive," I said. Gervaso breathed out in relief.

For the next twenty minutes the five of us sat in silence. I began looking through a magazine about farm and ranch implements, but I couldn't focus on the pages. Then an actual rancher walked into the room. He was holding his arm as if it had been broken, but he didn't look overly concerned. He even took off his hat and nodded to the ladies.

A few minutes later, my mother, McKenna, Ostin, and both of his parents hurried in. "How is he?" my mother asked.

"We're still waiting," I said. "But he made it here."

Ostin shook his head. "I can't believe this happened. It wasn't even the Elgen."

"What's going on with the hunters?" I asked.

"Jack called the Kane County police. If the hunters try anything, Jack and Zeus will take them out like Elgen guards."

* * *

It was another half hour before Mrs. Ridley emerged from the swinging emergency room doors. Her expression was grave, but she wasn't crying, which I took to be a good sign. Taylor ran to her.

“He’s going to be okay,” Mrs. Ridley said. They embraced. “It was close. He lost a lot of blood.”

Taylor broke down crying.

I walked over. “He’s okay?”

Mrs. Ridley looked into my eyes. “Yes. Thank you. The doctor said that whoever cauterized the artery saved his life.” She put her arms around me. “You saved his life.”

Taylor also hugged me. “Thank you, Michael.”

“I’m just glad,” I said.

“I need to sit down,” Mrs. Ridley said.

Mrs. Liss walked over to help Mrs. Ridley to a chair. “Come here, dear.”

Taylor asked, “How long will Dad be here?”

“They want to keep him a few days. He’s still low on blood, and they’re worried about infection. They say I can stay in the room.” She said to the rest of us, “The doctor said no visitors. You might as well go back. Thank you for coming.”

My mother joined us. “You sure you don’t need us?”

“I’m sure,” she replied.

My mother hugged her. “You’ll be in our prayers.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Taylor said to her mom.

“I can stay too,” I said.

Taylor took my hand. “I’ll stay with my mother.” She looked me in the eyes. “I’d like to be alone with my family.”

“I understand,” I said, feeling a little hurt. She must have seen it, because she kissed me on the cheek.

“I love you. I’ll see you back at the ranch.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon. Call if you need anything.”

“I will. Bye.”

As I turned to go, she said, “Michael.”

“Yes?”

“It’s just like my dream, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Exactly like your dream.”



I rode back to the ranch with my mother and the Lisses, leaving Taylor and her parents behind with Gervaso to watch over them. It was well past midnight when we got back. As we were entering the ranch's dirt road entryway, we passed two Kane County police trucks carrying the four hunters.

As we passed each other on the narrow road, one of the hunters glanced over at me. Electricity snapped between my fingers. I wanted to shock him.

The lights at the main house were still on as we pulled up the gravel driveway, and even though we had already phoned back the news, most everyone was still awake and waiting for us. I suppose they wanted to hear what was going on in person.

The chairman walked out to our car as we drove up. "How is he?"
"He's stable," I said, getting out of the car. "We didn't get to see him, but Mrs. Ridley filled us in."

“Is Gervaso staying with him?”

I nodded. “And Mrs. Ridley and Taylor are spending the night.”

Jack, Zeus, and Tanner walked up. Jack and I man hugged. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. What’s going on back here?”

“We took care of the hunters,” Zeus said.

Tanner grinned. “Every time they tried to move, Zeus shocked them.”

I looked at Zeus. “You’re not afraid they’ll tell someone?”

“No one would believe them if they did,” Tanner said. “They were so drunk, they couldn’t even speak. It’s like they were crazy.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were morons,” Jack said. “They just babbled. It was like they were speaking a foreign language. I didn’t hear one real word out of them.”

“They weren’t babbling when I saw them,” I said. I wondered if Taylor had broken their minds.

“Well, they were seriously messed-up dudes,” Tanner said. “The police couldn’t make sense of them.”

“What will happen to the hunters?” I asked the chairman.

“For now the police will probably put them in the drunk tank, then keep them in jail until someone posts bail.” The chairman’s voice was slow, and he had dark rings under his eyes. I couldn’t tell if he was worried or weary, or, most likely, both. “We’d better get some sleep. We just got new intelligence from the voice that I’ll share with you tomorrow. We’ve got a lot to prepare for.”

* * *

I said good night to my mother and the Lisses. Then Jack, Ostin, Zeus, Tanner, and I walked back to the bunkhouse. We didn’t joke around like we usually did. Not even Tanner, who pretty much joked about everything.

I don’t remember falling asleep, but I do remember the nightmare I had. Taylor, Jack, and I were being hunted in the dark by the four hunters. They cornered me, and I tried to use my electricity against

them, but it didn't work. Then one of them came closer. His face was blurred but somehow familiar.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm the voice," he said.

Then the hunter next to him said, "You know who I am." It was Hatch.

"Why are you together?" I asked fearfully.

Hatch put his arm around the voice and laughed. "Don't you know? We've always been together."



The next morning my mood was as gloomy as the weather—gray and threatening. Most everyone was still asleep, so I went for a ride on one of the ATVs, then came back for breakfast. I went over to the girls’ bunkhouse to see if Taylor had come back in the night, but Tessa said she hadn’t.

I walked into the kitchen to find Ostin, Zeus, Jack, and Tanner already eating. None of the girls were at the main house yet except Nichelle, who rarely ate breakfast.

For breakfast they were serving French toast with powdered sugar and sliced bananas, link sausage, and banana smoothies. It had been a while since anyone had tried to push bananas on us. I sat down next to Ostin.

“Hey, where’ve you been?” he asked with a full mouth.

“Out riding.”

“Taylor back?”

“Not yet.”

“Hey, Michael,” Tanner said. “We’re going to shoot clay pigeons after breakfast. Want to come?”

“Never done it before.”

“I’ll teach you,” Jack said.

Then Chairman Simon walked into the dining room. He looked about as bad as he had last night. He lifted a glass and tapped it with a fork to get our attention. The room quieted. “There will be a mandatory meeting in the main room at one thirty, right after lunch,” he said gruffly. “Any questions?”

“Any word on Mr. Ridley?” I asked.

“Not yet. I’m sure we’ll hear something by this afternoon.”

* * *

After breakfast, Tanner checked out two twelve-gauge shotguns, and he, Jack, Zeus, and I drove one of the golf carts out near the pond to shoot clay pigeons. On the western side of the pond there was an automatic trap that flung bright orange disks into the air for us to shoot at.

I had seen trap shooting in a movie before but had never shot at clays, or even fired a shotgun, for that matter. Jack had done it a million times before, and he gave me a few tips before I tried. I missed the first four and hit the next two. Tanner was a pretty good shot, hitting six out of seven. Zeus was an even worse shot than I was. He finally got frustrated and ended up just shooting the clay pigeons with lightning bolts. It looked pretty cool.

The lunch bell rang at noon, and we packed up the guns and clay pigeons and drove back up to the main house. Lunch was corned beef sandwiches, pasta salad, and banana pudding. I asked the chairman again if he’d heard anything about Mr. Ridley.

“I spoke to him a half hour ago,” he replied. “He’s still recovering, but, all things considered, he sounded well. He says they may release him tomorrow.”

“That’s good,” I said, wondering when Taylor would be back.

“Yes, we were lucky. I’d say we dodged a bullet, except we didn’t.” He stood. “Remember, we’ll be meeting right after lunch.” He walked out of the room.

I immediately started blinking. Something about the tone of his voice filled me with fear. It was clear that our time on the ranch was drawing to a close. Who knows, maybe even our time on earth. I was looking forward to the meeting about as much as a guilty murder suspect looks forward to the jury’s verdict.



I figured that it was probably the most serious meeting we'd had at the ranch. Guards were posted outside the house and all the outside help had been sent off the property.

About twenty of us gathered in the big room of the main house. The mood was as solemn as a funeral. I sat down next to Jack, Abi, and my mother—who forced a smile when she saw me but couldn't hide her nervousness. I must have been shrugging a lot, because she reached out and rested her hands on my shoulders.

Gervaso was back from Kanab, and even he was acting different. There was still no sign of Taylor, which made me sad. We always sat next to each other at these meetings.

The chairman cleared his throat as he walked to the front of the room. "Before we begin, we have a report on Charles." He nodded at Gervaso, who stood.

“I’ve just come from the hospital. Chuck’s hematocrit level is thirty-five, which is good. Unfortunately, he’s developed a fever, which is usually an indication of infection, so they’re going to keep him longer than planned. There was some talk about airlifting him to the St. George hospital, but for now they think they can handle it. He sends his gratitude for your concern and prayers.

“I also spoke to a deputy with the Kane County sheriff’s office. The hunters are still being detained. We’ve identified the man who shot Chuck and ran a background check. As we suspected, he has no connection to the Elgen. He’s a survivalist trained to live off the land, so he sometimes is gone for months at a time. Because of this, he’s considered a flight risk and the judge has denied bail. He’ll be sitting in jail until his arraignment, which could be several weeks. We’ll be gone before then.”

Chairman Simon nodded. “Thank you.” He walked to the side of the room to a large map of the South Seas. “Now to the heart of our discussion—defeating the Elgen by stealing the *Joule*.” He looked us over. “The only hard timeline we face is to strike before Hatch starts executing his Glows. Our sources tell us that he plans on doing this on the Elgen’s sixteen-year anniversary of the MEI. That gives us very little time to prepare. Which leads to the next conversation.

“There’s been a change to our original plan, one that we hope will give us an advantage. As you know, EGG Welch was sentenced to the rat bowl but, with Quentin, Tara, and Torstyn’s help, escaped. Since then he’s been on the run in Taiwan.”

“How do you know he’s in Taiwan?” Ostin asked.

“We’ve been in contact with him.” There was an audible gasp in the room. “Needless to say, this changes things. So before attacking Tuvalu, we need you to fly back over to Taiwan to rescue Welch.”

“We’re rescuing an EGG?” Jack asked incredulously. “Why not just rescue Hatch while we’re at it?”

The chairman ignored Jack’s sarcasm. “He’s not just any EGG. Welch was Hatch’s right-hand man. And he’s reached out to us for help. Without our help he’s in trouble, and he knows it. He also knows more about the Elgen’s procedures and plans than anyone but Hatch himself. A defector this high up is a godsend.

“That being said, you’ll take the jet from Las Vegas to Taiwan, where you will meet up with Welch and take him with you to Tuvalu to rescue the Glows and steal the *Joule*.”

“He agreed to this?” I asked.

“No,” Chairman Simon said. “But we’re not giving him a choice.”

“This is going to be fun,” Tessa said.

“What if he won’t help?” Ostin asked.

“Then we leave him in Taiwan.” The chairman walked back to the map. “From Taiwan, you will fly to Sydney, Australia, where you will take a commercial seaplane into Fiji. The Elgen have been using Fiji’s port to transport food and necessities. You will be smuggled into Tuvalu on a supply boat.”

“That sounds risky,” Ostin said. “Why don’t we just sail our own boat?”

The chairman frowned. “That would be far more risky. The Elgen are patrolling the waters around the island by sea and air. If an unknown vessel comes within twelve nautical miles of Tuvalu, it’s engaged. The Elgen are jamming their radios, and the boats are being boarded and sometimes sunk. Last week they sunk a Filipino fishing boat that trespassed in their waters. There were no survivors.”

Ostin nodded. “All right, smuggled it is.”

“The boat you’ll sail on is a supply ship called, ironically, *Risky Business*.” The chairman slowly panned the room. “Now comes the difficult part.”

“Because the rest of it was so easy,” Jack whispered to me.

I shook my head.

“Your first mission is to rescue Quentin, Tara, and Torstyn. As far as we know, Quentin was being held in Cell 25 on the island of Funafuti. Now he’s been sentenced to life in the monkey cage next to the previous Tuvaluan prime minister. Tara and Torstyn have been moved to the island of Niutao, or, as Hatch has renamed it, Hades. It’s the Elgen’s prison island. Right now it’s mostly dorms and barbwire fences, but they’re nearing completion of their construction on a rehabilitation center. Tara and Torstyn are being kept inside the completed section of the prison building.”

“Why do we need to save them first?” I asked. “Why not steal the *Joule*, and then, if things are going well, save them?”

“Why save them at all?” Nichelle asked. “They’ve got this coming.”

“Because to steal the *Joule*, we’ll need their powers,” the chairman said. “Tara has the ability to make herself look like other people, including Hatch. We’ll need her to get onboard the *Joule*.”

“Why would we trust her?” I asked. “Or any of them?”

“Hatch has Tara and Torstyn scheduled for the rat bowl,” the chairman answered. “If that hasn’t shaken their loyalty, I don’t know what will.”

“What if they think they can earn it back?” Nichelle asked.

“It’s a possibility, which is why we should free Quentin first. Tara and Torstyn will do what Quentin says.”

Zeus nodded in agreement. “That’s true.”

The chairman walked back to the board. “So here’s the rundown. The *Risky Business* has permission to sail directly to the Elgen’s island headquarters of Funafuti, which Hatch has renamed Nike. This is uncommon, as most of the supply ships are only authorized to sail to Demeter, the third-northernmost island, which Hatch has designated for agriculture and livestock.

“Once on Nike you’ll need to disembark without being seen. The dock is about a quarter mile from the town square where Quentin is being kept. It should not be too difficult to get to him, as the cage is in the center of the square. Unfortunately, accessibility isn’t the problem. The problem is that it is *too* accessible. There may be people around, and there are cameras everywhere. There are two full-time guards stationed in the square, one at each cage. In addition, we’ll need a way to get into the cage. Hopefully, one of the guards will have a key.”

“Hope isn’t a strategy,” Ostin said.

“No. It’s not. So if there’s not a key, McKenna will need to melt through the bars.”

“What if the metal is an alloy too strong to melt?” Ostin asked.

“It won’t be, with Tessa’s help.”

McKenna nodded. “I can do it.”

“We’ll have to bring a lot of drinking water,” Ostin said, looking at McKenna. “For after.”

“Yes, of course,” the chairman continued. “After Quentin has been liberated, you’ll need to get back onto the boat and sail to Hades. That’s where you’ll find Torstyn and Tara.”

“What about Kylee and Bryan?” Zeus asked.

“Bryan could burn through the bars,” Ostin said.

“Bryan and Kylee are currently being held at the Nike Starxource plant. Unlike the others, they’re scheduled to be released. As far as we know, they’re still loyal to Hatch.”

“We land on Hades, then what?” I asked.

“Once on Hades you’ll break into the prison and free Tara and Torstyn. After you have them, you’ll make your attempt to steal the *Joule*. I don’t have details on that plan, since it would be best if you devise that plan with Welch’s help.” He breathed out heavily. “Any questions?”

“Only a thousand of them,” Ostin said softly.

The chairman looked concerned. “I’m not going to soft-pedal this. You’re going in like lambs among wolves. It’s not impossible, but it’s going to be difficult. We’ve got one shot at this. Remember, at any sign of trouble the *Joule* will submerge, stranding you on the islands—which means you would come under attack from the entire Elgen army.”

Jack slowly shook his head. “We’re so screwed.”

“I have a question,” I said. “How are we going to get onto the boat in Fiji undetected?”

“I can speak to that,” Gervaso said. “The captain is a friend of mine from the Gulf War. He lost a leg saving my life. I trust him with my life.”

“Do you trust him with ours?” Tessa asked.

Gervaso looked incredulous. “Do you think I would consider this if I didn’t?”

No one said anything else, so Chairman Simon said, “That’s a lot to digest for now. Please don’t discuss any of this outside this room, especially near any staff. We can’t afford any leaks. You’re dismissed.”

We all slowly got up to leave. My mother hugged me. "Are you okay?" she asked.

I nodded. "Are you?"

"I don't know." She hugged me again; then I turned to walk out with the rest of the Electroclan.

On the house's front porch Tanner said to me, "We're going to die. You know that, don't you?"

I turned to him. "No. I don't know that. And neither do you. So don't say that again."

"Why? Afraid of the truth?"

"I'm afraid of you making it *your* truth. And then ours." I walked away from him, followed by Ostin.

After a moment Ostin said, "Statistically speaking, he's probably right."

I looked at him for a moment, then turned and walked the other way.



I suppose that the real reason I was so upset by Tanner and Ostin was that deep inside I was afraid that they were right. I guess that's usually how it goes, right? If someone says something that has no basis in truth, it doesn't bother us much. It's the things we fear they might be right about that hurt.

It seemed to me that the closer we got to leaving on the mission, the more uncertain I felt about the whole thing—and the more unlikely I thought it was that we'd succeed. It didn't help that Taylor hadn't been at the meeting. She somehow made things feel better to me. Or at least she made me feel better about them.

I took one of the ranch's mountain bikes and went out alone for a ride to clear my head. I think that I must have ridden at least ten miles on the dirt, washboard road before coming back. I kept to myself for the rest of the afternoon, only joining the others at dinner.

Ostin was waiting for me as I walked into the dining room. He looked sad, like someone who had just lost his best friend. He hadn't, but he looked like that.

"Hey," he said, walking up to me. "I'm sorry about what I said."

I really wasn't in the mood to talk about it. "Don't worry about it."

"That's all I've done since you left. Besides, I found another logical way of looking at this. It's more positive."

"How's that?"

"So far we've faced six life-threatening missions and we've beaten them all. So, statistically speaking, we're more likely to beat bad odds than not. So the more unlikely the odds, the better our odds."

I squinted. "Isn't that a paradox? Because if they're now good odds, they're not."

"No sense overthinking it," Ostin said.

I couldn't help but grin. "Whatever works. Let's eat."

Ostin looked relieved. "Great. 'Cause I'm starving, man. I'm starving."

* * *

Taylor and her mother didn't return to the ranch until after dark, about two hours after dinner. I was sitting on the front porch talking to Jack as their car pulled up and Taylor got out. She looked as if she hadn't slept for days. I remember how messed up I was when I lost my father, so I wasn't surprised. I walked over to her. "How's your dad?"

"He's doing okay," she said. "He's come down with a fever, so they've got him on antibiotics, but they're still hopeful that they can release him soon." She looked at me. "I hear I missed an important meeting."

I took her hand and we walked a little ways off.

"Yeah. Before we steal the *Joule*, we're going to fly to Taiwan and rescue Welch."

"I'm not going," she said.

I looked at her. "What?"

"I'm sorry. I wasn't going to tell you tonight. . . . I just can't." She looked at me. "I'm sorry to let you down."

I had no idea what to say. Even though part of me had wanted her to stay, my heart felt like a bag of concrete had just dropped on it. Finally I said, "You'd just get in the way, anyway."

She didn't respond. She didn't need to. We both knew what I was saying was absurd. Ridiculously absurd. Then she looked at me in a way she never had before. Her eyes welled up with tears and her chin started quivering. "Michael, I think we need to break up."

If the last announcement had hit me like a bag of concrete, this one was the entire concrete truck. "What?"

"I've been thinking a lot about this. I think it's the right thing to do."

When I could speak, I asked, "Did I do something wrong?"

She wiped her eyes. "No, it's not you. It's not even us."

"If it's not us, then what is it?"

Tears fell down her face. "It's just . . . it's just not the right time for us."

Now my eyes began to well up. "Please don't do this. Not now."

"I'm sorry. *Now* is the time to do this."

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't have said it anyway. There was a lump in my throat the size of a basketball.

Finally she said, "I'm going to bed. I just want this day to end." Without saying good night, she turned and walked away.

I hadn't felt that awful since my father died.



When I woke the next day, it felt like that concrete truck was still parked on my chest. I didn't want to get out of bed. I didn't want to do anything except disappear. Taylor was my first girlfriend. I'd never had my heart broken by a girl before. It sucked.

* * *

That afternoon Jack came to find me. "Hey, dude," he said. "It's, like, past noon. You missed breakfast and lunch. Aren't you hungry?"

"No."

"No?" Jack paused for a moment, then said, "You okay?"

"Taylor broke up with me last night."

"What?"

"Let's face it, it was only a matter of time. She was always out of my league."

Jack glared. “That’s totally messed up, man. She’s the one out of her league. And if she’s too stupid to see that, then she doesn’t deserve you.”

“She’s not stupid,” I said.

“See? She treats you like crap, and you’re still loyal. You’re too good for her, man. Way too good for her. I’ve always thought that.”

I know he was trying to make me feel better, but it wasn’t working. I felt like defending her. I felt like crying. Mostly I just felt stupid. I’d been shot at, beaten, tortured, and fed to rats—and none of those things hurt as much as this. Why did I feel the same sense of panic I had in Cell 25? This was new territory for me and it sucked big-time.

“I’m not too good for her,” I said. “It’s just a hard time.”

“When has it been otherwise?” Jack said.

I rolled over. I couldn’t answer his question.

* * *

I spent most of the day in bed. I was twitching and sparking like crazy. I had no appetite. I wouldn’t have eaten, anyway. I wouldn’t have gone into the dining room. I didn’t want to take the chance of seeing *her*. I couldn’t stand the pain of that. *How could she just dump me like that?*

That night my mother came and got me for dinner. I was still lying in my bunk staring mindlessly at the bottom of Ostin’s bunk when she walked into my dorm.

“Hey,” she said.

I looked over. “Hey.”

“You okay?”

I didn’t answer. I’m sure she already knew the answer. That’s why she was there, right? She sat down at the foot of my bed. “Jack told me what happened.” She slightly grinned. “Then Ostin did, then Zeus and Nichelle and Tessa and Tanner . . .”

“Great,” I said. “Everyone knows I’m a loser.”

“You’re not a loser. They just care about you.” She rubbed her hand along my leg. “I’m sorry, honey. There’s nothing worse than a broken

heart. Except maybe being eaten by rats. That would be pretty awful too.”

I knew she was trying to get me to smile, but it didn’t work.

“I wish I could take your pain away.”

“How could she just drop me like that?” I said. “How does that even work? How do you just stop loving someone?”

My mother frowned. “Hearts are complicated machines.”

I closed my eyes.

“She still loves you, you know.”

“No, I don’t know that.”

“She does.”

“She has a bizarre way of showing it.”

“Maybe. But she’s hurting too.”

“How do you know?”

My mother hesitated. “Because I talked to her.”

I rose up on my elbow. “You talked to her? That’s none of your business.”

“You’re my business. I care about you. And I care about Taylor, too.”

I lay back down. Finally I asked, “What did she say?”

“Not a whole lot, really. She mostly just cried. She also told me that you’re her best friend and how much she needs you.”

“Then why did she break up with me?”

“I think that’s maybe why. *Because* she needs you so much.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Who said that love is supposed to make sense?”

I breathed out heavily. After a full minute I said, “What should I do, Mom?”

“Have a little faith,” she said.

“In what?”

“In love.”

“You just said it doesn’t make sense.”

“No, not always. But it does have a way of coming around to itself. You know I told your father that I wouldn’t marry him for a million dollars?”

“When did you say that?”

“A month before we got engaged.” She leaned closer to me. “Just give her some time. It’s when we feel desperate and try to force things that permanent damage is done. Just let go. Let her find her way back.”

“What if she doesn’t come back?”

She smiled at me sadly, then said, “Then some other girl will thank her lucky stars.” She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, then sat back. “Now come eat. It’s a broken heart, not a hunger strike.”



The next few days I didn't see Taylor at all. Not just because of us breaking up, but because her father had finally returned and she stayed at his side to take care of him.

In spite of my friends' efforts to the contrary, I kept to myself. I slept a lot. I told myself it was because I was storing up for the mission ahead, but I'm pretty sure that everyone knew the truth—I was seriously depressed. And nothing saps the energy out of you like depression. That and RESATs, I guess. RESATs, at least, can be turned off.

* * *

When I wasn't sleeping, I was looking for things to do by myself. Finally, one afternoon of my "post-Taylor" life, I took one of the golf carts and drove out to see Matthew, the guy who was in charge of

running the ranch—the cattle, farming, all the ranching stuff. I had met him before but had never really talked to him. He was with the resistance, but he was also a real rancher, the kind who wears cowboy boots and a hat to church and is like sixty years old but can still wrestle a cow to the ground.

As I walked in, Matthew was fiddling with the black hoses on the back of a tractor. I cleared my throat and he looked up. “Mr. Vey,” he said slowly with a Western twang. “Didn’t hear you come in. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I was bored. Is there anything I can do to help out around here?”

“Well, I thought of puttin’ you kids to work, but Mr. Simon said to let you get your rest. Lord knows you’ll be needin’ it.”

“I know. But I’m going crazy.”

He thought a moment, then said, “Well, you could cut some firewood. That’s always good when you got a little excess energy to work out. It’s as therapeutic as a punchin’ bag. You ever use a chain saw?”

“No, sir.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“Just in a horror movie.”

He laughed. “Well, it ain’t horror and it ain’t rocket science. It ain’t even tractor science. I’ll show you.” He walked to the side of the garage and brought down an orange-handled saw. He checked it for gas, then set it on the ground.

“You take it by this safety handle. To start, you put it on the ground, prime it by pushing this little bubble, then pull this rope.” He pulled the rope and the saw fired up. He lifted it, shouting over the sound of its whine.

“This lever right here engages the chain.” He pulled it back, and the chain started spinning. Then he released it and the motor stopped. “It’s got this safety. If you drop it, it will turn off.” He handed me the saw. “Think you can handle it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I know you can. There’s two ol’ cedar trees just west of the RV shed that I cut down yesterday. Go ahead and cut them into two-foot logs and pile them up. I’ll send someone by later to pick ’em up.”

“All right. Thank you.”

“No, thank you. And wear these.” He handed me some safety glasses. “Start by cuttin’ the smaller branches off the trees, then cut the trunks. Just be careful. That saw will cut through your leg as slick as snot.”

I had never heard that phrase before. I hoped I’d never hear it again.

I drove the golf cart back around to the RV shed. The trees Matthew had told me about were on their sides next to the base of their freshly cut trunks.

I dragged one of the trees away from the other and put on my glasses and started the saw. I began cutting off the smaller branches at the top of the tree. I can see why Matthew thought it was therapy. It felt good just cutting, the air filling with the fresh smell of sap and sawdust.

It was hot work, and after twenty minutes I took off my shirt. I had completely stripped the first tree and was starting on its trunk when I noticed Mrs. Ridley standing about ten yards from me. I turned off the saw and took off my glasses.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“Hi, Michael. I’m sorry to interrupt you. When you get a chance, Chuck would like to talk to you.”

I couldn’t imagine what he wanted. “Is he up walking already?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Let me finish cutting this tree; then I’ll come up.”

“Thank you.” She turned and walked away. I watched her for a moment, then fired up the saw and went back to cutting up the trunk. I wondered what he wanted. Honestly, I didn’t look forward to seeing him. He was almost always abrasive. Some guys are just gruff that way. Especially about their daughters. Not that that mattered anymore. I wondered if I would see Taylor. I hoped so because I still loved her; I hoped not for the exact same reason.

* * *

About twenty minutes later I put on my shirt, got into the golf cart, and drove down to the small house where Mr. Ridley was recovering.

Mrs. Ridley met me at the door. "Thank you for coming, Michael."

I furtively glanced around for Taylor, but she wasn't there. I wondered where she was hiding. "No problem."

"Chuck's in here," she said, leading me to the main bedroom.

Mr. Ridley was sitting up in bed, propped up by pillows. It was the first time I'd seen him since he'd been shot. Not surprisingly, he looked a lot better. "Michael, come in. Please."

I stepped inside, and Mrs. Ridley stepped out and shut the door behind me.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"It's what you already did. Simon told me how you saved my life."

"It was nothing."

"My life's nothing?"

Inside I groaned. This guy could even make thanking you for saving his life painful. "I didn't mean that."

"You did something heroic. Accept it."

"I was just trying to help."

"Well, you did. Take a seat." He motioned to a stool next to a small writing desk. I sat down facing him, waiting for what he was going to say. "Taylor said you two broke up." He made it sound as if it had been a mutual decision.

"She dumped me."

"Do you know why?"

"I guess she doesn't love me anymore."

He just looked at me for a moment, then shook his head. "If she didn't love you, she wouldn't have been in her room crying for the last few days."

"Then I guess I don't know why."

"It's because she cares *too much* about you."

I shook my head. I wondered if this was a line all adults used. "She didn't seem to care too much about breaking my heart."

He frowned. "I know." He carefully shifted his legs. "The first thing any police officer learns on duty is that people are strange animals. They often do the exact opposite of what you'd expect. For instance,

they're so afraid of failure that they embrace it. Do you know what I mean?"

"No, sir."

"Let's say you meet someone you think is attractive. You think to yourself, *I'd like to meet her*. But then that other voice in your head, you know the one, the voice that tells you how stupid or how ugly you are, says, *Are you crazy? She'd never be interested in you*. So you never introduce yourself, and the result is, you never meet her. You have embraced failure."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I owe you. Truth is, I owed you before you saved my life. And I've been a jerk." He sat up a little more, grimacing with the action. "It's no secret that I love my daughter. And I know her. She's miserable. She's terrified of losing you. She's so afraid that she broke up with you."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I know it doesn't. At least not to us. That's because you and I are straightforward kind of guys. We call a spade a spade, you know?" He paused. "I've had a lot of time to think over everything the last few days, and here's the truth of the situation. If you go on this harebrained mission—and I'm pretty sure you're going to—and you don't come back, Taylor will never forgive herself. She'll wonder if she could have saved you. The unknown will kill her."

"And there's more on the line. She told me about her sister being fed to rats. I know there's not a lot of love there, but blood is blood. And they share the same DNA. I don't know how that will play out either, but I don't think Taylor can stay back and respect herself."

"Truth is, it's a crappy situation all around. You're a good kid, Michael. No, you're a good man. You've made choices fully grown men aren't strong enough to make. And Taylor is a good woman. She's made those same hard choices. Her experiences have put her way beyond her years. Way beyond me. She's experienced enough to make this decision by herself. That's a hard thing for a parent, to trust their children to make decisions that could have dangerous repercussions—perhaps more difficult than you can understand right now." I noticed that his eyes were actually welling up. "I love Taylor

more than I can say, and this is an awful dilemma for me to be in. But I'm not a fool. If I let her go, I could lose her. If I make her stay, I could lose her. So how do I choose? I suppose the bigger question is, is it even my decision to make?"

"I think she's already made her decision," I said.

"It would appear so, but she didn't. I manipulated the situation. When your parent almost dies and then makes a request . . . well, that's more pressure than a child should have to face. Look at what you were willing to do to save your own mother, going to Peru and all that.

"And that leads me to another revelation I've had lying here. Here I am in one of the safest places on the planet, guarded by enough weaponry to have won the Civil War, and I was still almost killed.

"The truth is, life is a house of cards. Taylor could stay back and be killed in a car accident next week. She could get cancer. Heck, she could catch the flu and die. Safety is an illusion." He leaned slightly forward, and I saw him grimace with pain. Then he said, "So I'm going to ask you a very important question, and I want your completely honest answer. No matter how painful it is for either of us. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"In your opinion, how important is Taylor to this mission?"

I took a deep breath. "She's been important to every mission."

"And this one?"

"There's no way of knowing that."

"You're right, but what does your gut tell you? Can you succeed without her?"

I looked down for a moment, then said, "I don't know. We haven't tried. But looking back over Peru and Taiwan, we wouldn't have succeeded there without her."

He was quiet a moment, then said, "I thought so." He rubbed his chin. "I appreciate your honesty. I'm going to have a talk with her. Thanks for coming by."

"Don't mention it."

"Michael."

"Yes?"

“Thanks for being so good to my daughter. I’d be proud to call you my son. Not anytime soon, but maybe one day.”

“Thank you.” I turned and walked out.

Mrs. Ridley stood as I came out of the room. “How was it?”

“Surprising,” I said.

She looked at me curiously. “Surprising good or bad?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” I said, and walked out of the house.

I wondered what Mr. Ridley planned on saying to Taylor. More interesting, I wondered what she’d say back.



The following afternoon around three o'clock the dinner bell rang. Ostin, McKenna, and I were just east of the horse corral watching Eric and Peggy, our beekeepers, check the hives. They were dressed in white, full-body bee suits and looked a little bit like space people as they walked between the rows of white boxes.

When we first got there, they had sprayed the area with smoke to calm the bees, but the bees still weren't happy with them poking around and kept swarming them. I was glad it wasn't me, but it was still kind of cool to watch.

I did notice something peculiar. The bees were more attracted to me and McKenna than Ostin. Actually, more to me than McKenna. It didn't bother me that much, except that I kept killing bees. I'd gotten so electric that anytime they got too close, my electricity would zap them. McKenna purposely made herself too hot to land on, which kept the bees from stinging her.

Ostin noticed the phenomenon too and immediately created a hypothesis. "I think we're seeing an example of electroreception."

"What's that?" McKenna asked.

"When bees fly, they collect atmospheric electricity in their antennas. When it visits a flower, it deposits that electricity. Bees can detect the pattern of electric fields on flowers and use that information to tell whether or not other bees have already visited the flower. You both probably look like very large flowers to them."

"How disappointing for them," I said.

* * *

A few minutes later the dinner bell rang. Ostin checked his watch. "That's weird. It's only three o'clock. Too early for dinner. Not that it's ever too early to eat."

"Must be a special meeting," McKenna said.

We said good-bye to Peggy and Eric and walked up the hill to the house.

Chairman Simon, my mother, and Gervaso were standing on the porch near the front door. They all had somber expressions—not freaked out or anything, just really serious. I also noticed that two of our vans were parked near the side of the house and things were being carried out to them.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Just go into the meeting room," Gervaso said. "We have an announcement."

I looked at my mother. She hugged me but offered no explanation.

Only Zeus and Tessa were inside, so Ostin, McKenna, and I sat down next to them and waited for everyone else to arrive.

Within ten minutes everyone came, even Grace, whom none of us ever saw much of.

Abi and Jack came in with wet hair. They had been swimming in the pond.

After everyone had arrived, my mother came in looking around for me. I waved to her, and she walked over and sat down by my side.

I should say that everyone came except Taylor. She wasn't there, but I guess that I didn't really expect her to be. She seemed to have checked out, not just from my life but the Electroclan as well. I can't say that I was happy or sad about her being absent; seeing her, not seeing her, both were painful. Hearts are weird that way.

We quieted as Gervaso and the chairman entered the room. Gervaso shut the door behind them.

"Thanks for coming," the chairman said. "I'll cut right to the chase. We've just got our orders. It's time to go."

Even though we knew it was coming, the actual announcement still knocked the collective wind out of us. Not one of us said a word. Gervaso let the announcement settle, then said, "We're leaving tomorrow morning at nine. We'll drive to Las Vegas and spend the day, then fly out early the next morning."

"Yeah, Vegas," Zeus said, slapping hands with Jack.

"Why Vegas?" McKenna asked.

"That's where the plane is right now. We also thought it might be nice for you to have some fun before you go."

"You mean the mission isn't going to be fun?" Tessa mumbled.

"There will be twelve of us going on this mission," Gervaso said. "Michael, Taylor, Ostin, McKenna, Zeus, Tessa, Abi, Jack, Tanner, Ian, Nichelle, and me. Grace will be helping from here. If all goes well, we'll be coming back with sixteen."

"Excuse me," I said, raising my hand. "But Taylor won't be going."

"Yes, I will," Taylor said.

I looked over. Taylor was standing next to the door.

Gervaso slightly nodded to her, then turned back to us. "So we've got an even dozen. Bring your bags with you to breakfast tomorrow. We're traveling light, so take only what you need. Breakfast will be ready at eight and we'll be leaving at nine sharp, so say your long good-byes tonight. Everyone get some good sleep. We need you sharp and well rested, and over the next two weeks that's not a luxury you're going to get enough of." He took a deep breath. "All right, Electroclan. You're dismissed."

I looked back over to where Taylor had been, but she was already gone.

I turned to my mother. Her eyes were filled with tears.

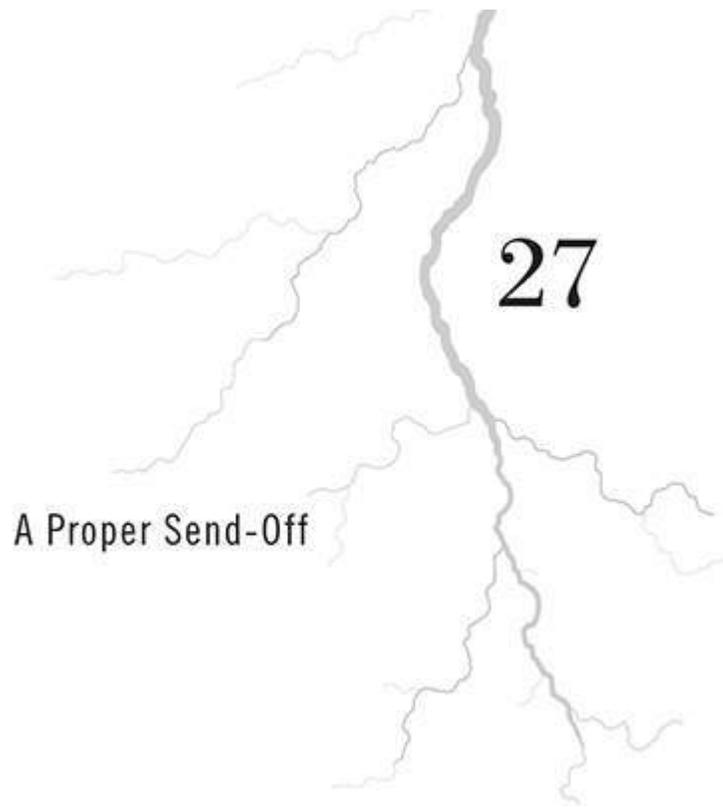
“You knew it was time?” I asked.

“They just told me.” She brushed a tear from her cheek.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said. “We’ll be back in a few weeks.”

I think we both knew it was false bravado, but she nodded. “Of course. Just a few weeks.” She gave me a hug. “Just be careful.”

I looked at her for a moment, then forced a smile. “I’m always careful. Besides, what could go wrong?”



In spite of Gervaso's counsel, none of us slept much. Jack, Zeus, and I played Texas Hold'em until three in the morning. Five hours later we carried our bags up to the house. As we trudged up the hill with our packs slung over our shoulders, we could smell the wafting sweetness of bacon and syrup.

"Waffles," Ostin said with religious fervor.

"A proper send-off," I said.

"How far is Vegas from here, anyway?" Jack asked.

"I think it is about three hours," I said.

"I can't wait," Ostin said. "I've been studying how to count cards. I'm going to bring down the house."

"You're too young to gamble," Jack said.

Ostin thought a moment, then said, "That's okay. I'll just tell some adult how to play."

* * *

We ate breakfast while others loaded our bags into the vans. We finished eating, then walked out front of the main house, where the cars were waiting. Pretty much everyone on the ranch came out to see us off. Peggy handed Ostin, McKenna, and me a piece of honeycomb from their previous day's foraging. "The bees send their love," she said.

My mother was pretty weepy, which didn't surprise me, but it didn't make things any easier. She held me for a long time. The truth was, I was feeling more sad than I let on. I wondered how she would handle it if I didn't come back.

Still, my mother wasn't as bad as Ostin's mother, who, no surprise, was practically wailing. I think Ostin would have been super-embarrassed, except he was crying himself.

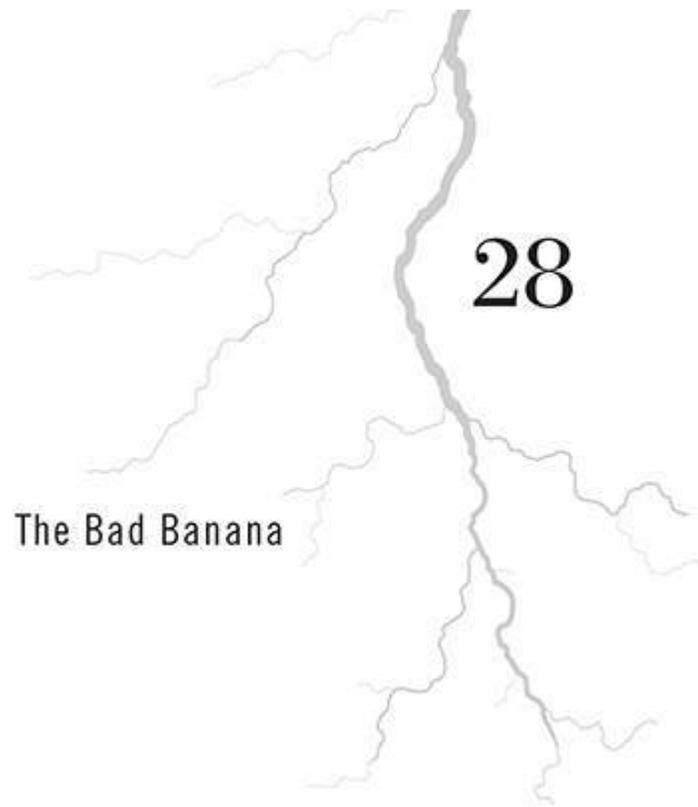
The others weren't as bad. Zeus and Tessa showed no emotion whatsoever. It's not that they had attachment disorder or anything. It's just that, outside of the Electroclan, they lacked anyone to be attached to.

Taylor hadn't come up for breakfast and only showed up with her parents a few minutes before we were to leave. Mrs. Ridley's eyes were red and puffy, and Mr. Ridley looked sad but was walking for the first time even though he was leaning against a tall wooden walking stick.

Taylor climbed into the van I wasn't in, which didn't surprise me but still made me kind of mad. I wondered what was going through her head. I think it's the first time I wished that I could have her power instead of mine.

Gervaso took roll call, then climbed into the passenger seat of the other van. "Adios!" he shouted out the window. The vans pulled out, kicking up gravel and dust as we left the ranch.

My mother blew me a kiss, then covered her eyes with her hands. I had to look away.



Maybe Vegas was kind of like a last meal before being executed, but I wasn't about to complain. We arrived a little after noon and checked in at the Bellagio hotel. I had never stayed anywhere so luxurious before. The closest I'd come was that hotel in Taiwan. Of course the Gadsden, that place in Douglas, Arizona, used to be nice. But now it was just haunted.

Zeus, Nichelle, and Tessa had stayed at the Bellagio before, but in a suite roughly the size of Idaho, so they weren't as impressed as the rest of us, but they were also still glad for the break.

Gervaso gave us a thousand dollars each and sent us off with a stern warning not to talk to strangers.

Ostin, McKenna, Taylor, Ian, and I went to the David Copperfield magic show, something Ostin had always wanted to do. I didn't sit next to Taylor. It felt strange to not touch her or hold her hand. It was

as strange to have lost that privilege as it had been to initially have it granted.

Ian kind of ruined the show for us because he kept telling us how the tricks were done. We had to leave the show early because someone noticed us glowing and pointed at us. Everyone thought that we were part of the show. David Copperfield even took a bow for it.

Afterward, we ran into Gervaso in the casino, and Ostin gave him five hundred dollars and got him to play cards for him. They kept playing until Gervaso had won more than five thousand dollars and quit because he was drawing too much attention.

Ostin took his winnings and bought a gold bracelet for McKenna, and still had enough left to stop in M&M's World and load up on a couple of hundred dollars of chocolate for the ride to Taiwan.

Still, Taylor stayed close to McKenna. I caught her looking at me several times. I knew she wanted to talk, but I wasn't ready. Frankly, my emotions had shifted. I was less sad than mad. I know it sounds weird, but people are wired that way. It's like when a parent loses their kid. They get all frantic and upset, afraid that something has happened to them, but after the kid finally turns up, the parent wants to beat them. I guess that's how I was feeling. Like my mom said, "Who says love is supposed to make sense?"

* * *

Jack told us that before the marines went to war, the guys would go to town and get tattoos—mostly ones they hoped that they would live to regret. Jack wanted to get tattoos on his arms that looked like my lightning scars, if it was okay by me, which it was, but I had to go with him so the tattoo artist could copy them.

McKenna and Taylor wanted to hang out by the pool before it got too late, so Ostin came with us. As we were leaving the hotel, we ran into Nichelle. When she found out we were going to a tattoo parlor, she wanted to come even though she already had like twenty of them. Actually, it probably was because she had twenty of them.

"I should get one that says 'Death to Hatch,'" she said. "With a lightning bolt through a skull."

“Maybe after he’s dead,” I said. “Otherwise he might not take kindly to it.”

“You’re right,” she said. “Are you going to Sin City Tattoo? It’s famous. It even has its own reality TV show. I got this one there.” She lifted her shirt just above her belly button to show the words in black, Gothic letters:

Not all who wander are lost

Nichelle actually had a pretty great stomach, something you’d never notice with the loose clothes she always wore.

Jack looked up. “No, I’m taking this guy’s recommendation. He had killer ink.”

“What guy?” she asked.

“One of the hotel’s security guards. I ran into him in the gym. He looked like he eats nails for breakfast.”

Ostin’s brows fell. “You mean he had no teeth?”

Jack just shook his head.

* * *

We took a taxi about four miles from the hotel to the tattoo parlor that was down a side street, then down an alley the car couldn’t fit through. The place was called the Bad Banana, which I thought was a stupid name, but once I met the owner, it kind of made sense. He looked wrinkly and overly tanned like an old banana. He also looked like he hadn’t bathed since Bush was president, and he had like seven teeth.

He noticed Nichelle first and commenced to hit on her.

“What do you need, babe? I’ve got a special for the ladies as long as it’s on lady parts.”

“Save it,” she said. “We’re here for the marine wannabe.”

“I want my arms to look like his,” Jack said, pointing to my arms. “Can you do that?”

The dude stared at my arms. “Those are some nasty tats. Where’d you get that ink?”

“Mexico,” I said.

“Mexico,” he repeated. “The only thing I get from Mexico is the runs.”

Nichelle slowly shook her head. “Wow, you’ve got class written all over you.”

“In ink,” the man replied, mistaking what she said as a compliment.

“Well?” Jack said. “Can you?”

“Yeah, I can do it.”

The guy was creepy, but I had to admit that he was pretty good at what he did. It took about two hours, but after it was done, Jack’s arms looked exactly like mine, though with a lot bigger muscles.

* * *

The tattoo parlor was in a pretty dodgy part of town, and as we walked out of the shop, a man wearing a hoodie approached us and pulled out a gun. A revolver. It looked ancient compared to what the Elgen were carrying these days.

“Give me your money,” he said. “All of it.”

Jack just looked at him. “Man, did you ever pick the wrong guys to stick up.”

“What kind of a gun is that?” I asked.

“A .38 Special,” Ostin said. “Practically a dinosaur. Smith and Wesson started making them more than a hundred years ago. I mean, they were using those things in World War I. I wouldn’t use one if I was mugging someone. I mean, pretty good chance someone like Jack is going to survive it and beat you senseless. Of course, Michael would survive anything, but with this gun, even I’ve got a chance.”

The mugger looked at us with a bewildered expression. “Just give me your money.”

I looked at our would-be mugger. “Okay, Mr. .38 Special. You clearly don’t know much about guns. Do you know anything about electricity?”

He just blinked. “What?”

“Electricity. Did you go to school?”

“Do I look like I went to school?”

“A school for losers,” Ostin said.

“He looks like he crawled out from under a rock,” Nichelle said.

The man’s face turned red. “You’re dissing a man holding a gun at you, and you think I’m dumb? I’m about to blow a hole through one of you. Then we’ll see how smart you are.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Ostin said.

“That’s not going to happen,” I said. “Normally I’d give you the chance to walk away, but then you’ll probably just do the same thing to someone else, so you can either give me the gun or I’m going to have to take it from you.”

He looked at me incredulously. “You guys high?”

“On life,” Ostin said.

Nichelle rolled her eyes. “That was really lame, dude.”

“Just give me the gun,” I said again.

“Take it,” he said, his finger moving a little on the trigger.

I shrugged. “If you say so.”

I blasted him up against the wall of the building behind him. His gun went off from the pressure of my pulse, but the strength of my pulse stopped the bullet in midair. The man fell to the ground.

After everything had settled, Ostin reached over and picked the bullet up off the ground. “He wasn’t as dumb as we thought. Hollow points. That could have done some damage.”

“Still dumb,” Nichelle said.

Jack squatted down and checked the guy’s pulse. “He’s still breathing.”

I picked up his gun. I held it by its barrel and focused my energy to the palm of my hand. The barrel bent like rubber. “That’s not going to work again.” I tossed it back down onto the ground next to the mugger, who was still unconscious.

“You just melted it,” Jack said.

“Holy crap,” Ostin said. “That’s a high alloy chromium-molybdenum steel. You melted it like ice cream. I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Neither did I.”

“You know what that means?”

I turned and looked at him. “Yeah. It means I’m still getting more electric.”



After the tattoo place we stopped for ice cream at a Cold Stone. Then I went back to my room to take a nap. About an hour later Ostin woke me as he came back into our room. I think there had been quieter entries at Walmart stores on Black Friday. I groaned out in frustration. “Really, man? I was sleeping.”

“Sorry, dude. Didn’t know you were sleeping.”

“What time is it?” I asked, rubbing my eyes.

“A little after eight. Almost time for dinner.”

“Where have you been?”

“Just hanging down at the pool with McKenna and Taylor.” He walked over next to me. “Are you ever going to talk to Taylor again?”

“I don’t know. Ever’s a long time.”

“She’s really upset.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Been there.”

Ostin suddenly nodded. "Oh, I get it. It's payback. Let her stew in her own juices. Awesome."

I glared at him. "I'm not letting her 'stew in her own juices.' I'm not trying to hurt her."

"Oh," he said, looking confused. "Well, you're still doing a good job of it." He went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. For the first time since Taylor broke up with me, I felt like I was the mean one.

* * *

Ostin and I met up with everyone for dinner at Prime, an expensive steak house in the Bellagio. It had large floor-to-ceiling windows that opened to the fountains outside. Gervaso told us to not worry about the price and just go crazy with our orders, so we all did. I ordered a caviar appetizer (I didn't like it, but I've always wanted to know what the big deal was with eating raw fish eggs); the dry-aged, bone-in rib eye steak; truffle mashed potatoes; and a crème brûlée for dessert.

Ostin, Zeus, and Jack had even more than I did. I looked at the prices on the menu, and just my meal alone was more than two hundred dollars. I figured that we wouldn't be eating much for a while and if this was going to be our last real meal, it might as well be epic.

* * *

Taylor was quiet throughout dinner. At one point we made eye contact. As we looked into each other's eyes, I suddenly saw my friend again. And the thing is, you can't hurt a friend without hurting yourself. I wanted to take her pain away. Most of all, I finally wanted to be with her more than I wanted to punish her for hurting me. I guess that's a sign of love. Maybe it's a sign of maturity too.

After dinner Taylor got up to leave. I stopped her outside the restaurant's front door.

"Taylor."

She stopped and turned to me. She looked anxious.

"Would you like to go for a walk?"

She didn't speak but nodded her head.

"All right. Let's go."

I didn't take her hand. At least not at first. Things were still awkward.

We walked out to the main Vegas drag. Even though it was night, we didn't have to worry about our glows, as it was practically like day, bright with the million-watt jungle of Vegas casino signs. Without speaking, we walked on the long sidewalk that ran along the outside of the Bellagio's fountains. I wasn't sure what to say.

Taylor broke the silence. "I'm so full."

"Yeah, I ate way too much. It felt kind of good."

"I know, right?"

Silence.

"How was the pool?" I asked. "It looked kind of crowded."

"Good. Mostly good. There was this creepy guy in the hot tub hitting on us, so McKenna heated the water up to like a hundred and thirty degrees until he fled. It was funny watching him squirm as it got hotter. He didn't want to act like it was too hot for him, because we were just sitting there."

"How did you stand the heat?"

"Abigail took away the pain. It was cool. I mean, I kind of got burned, but it was totally worth it."

"You could have just rebooted him and told him to leave."

"I don't think there was much there to reboot."

I smiled, and she said, "I heard you had a little excitement."

"A little," I said. "Who told you?"

"Jack told Abi, Abi told McKenna, McKenna told me. The usual network."

"Yeah, some dude pulled a gun on us. I melted it."

"It's kind of amazing. A year ago that experience would have been traumatic. Now it's practically boring you. Do you think Superman gets bored beating up bad guys?"

We both leaned against the stone ledge separating the sidewalk from the fountain. "I'm not Superman."

"No, because there's no such thing as Superman. But there is such a thing as you. Think about it. The whole world is obsessed with

superheroes, and you're the real thing. How does that feel?"

"*We're* the real thing," I said. "And it feels heavy."

"You're right. Life is heavy."

"Did you see Jack's tattoos?"

Taylor smiled and nodded. "I told you that your Lichtenberg things were cool. Jack wanted to look just like you."

"I don't know why."

"I do. You're his hero. He wants to be just like you."

I looked at her. "Jack? Yeah, right."

"Of course he does. He looks up to you. We all do." Her expression turned more serious. "Especially me."

I just looked at her.

"Michael, I'm really sorry." She looked into my eyes. "Will you please forgive me? Please?"

I turned away from her toward the fountain. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"I know." She started to cry. "I don't blame you for being mad."

"Are you reading my mind?"

"No," she said. "I can see it."

I took a deep breath, then turned back. "I've never been in love before. I didn't know how to handle that kind of rejection. It was painful. Like when my dad died painful."

"I'm so sorry."

"My heart isn't like a light I can just turn on and off."

She wiped a tear from her cheek. "You think mine is? You think I wasn't hurting too? I cried almost the whole time we were apart. I wasn't rejecting you. I didn't love you less. I never stopped loving you. Not for a second."

Taylor wiped both of her eyes. "I once read something about love—that real love isn't that 'can't live without you, sweaty palm' thing. Real love is caring about someone else more than yourself. I know it sounds stupid, but the only way I could let go of you was because I love you so much."

"You're right," I said. I looked deeply into her eyes. "It does sound stupid."

She punched me on the arm. "I was stupid to think I could live without you."

"Don't ever leave me again," I said.

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"I promise. Will you?"

I looked at her for a moment, then replied, "Ditto."



They say that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, and in our case, with the exception of Jack's tattoos, and Taylor's and my reunion, that's probably true. They also say that Vegas is a desert mirage, and I think that's true too, because by the time we were on the plane, it already seemed like a dream. A dream headed into a nightmare.

We left early in the morning, like five thirty, which meant that none of us got much sleep. In fact, Tessa, Zeus, Tanner, Ian, Nichelle, and Jack never went to sleep at all. They figured that with a twelve-hour flight they could sleep on the way. Pretty smart, really.

When Ostin and I got to the lobby, Gervaso and two white shuttle buses were waiting for us. The all-nighters were already inside and, with the exception of Zeus, were asleep. Zeus had consumed three Red Bulls.

Our plane was a few miles from the hotel at a small executive airport. Scott and Boyd, our pilot and copilot, walked out to meet us. I hadn't seen either of them since we had separated in Douglas. It was good to see them again. Scott went to hug me but jumped back.

"You shocked me."

Another reminder that I was getting more electric. "Sorry. I can't always help it."

Boyd just gave me a salute from a safe distance. "Good to see you, Michael."

We helped the pilots load the plane, and we were in the air in less than a half hour. Everyone was kind of grumpy, but I couldn't blame them. First, we were tired. Second, it's like we were just given the shortest vacation in history and it had already ended. Third, well, we were going to visit Hatch. Not exactly a joyfest.

Taylor fell asleep lying against my shoulder. It was good to be back together.

I couldn't help but wonder if we were doing the right thing or if there was a better way of defeating the Elgen. I couldn't think of a better way. Still, I felt like we were marching into hell. That's actually a line from a song my father used to like. Ironically, maybe appropriately, the song was—is—called "The Impossible Dream."

It's a really old song, but still a pretty cool one. It's about doing what's right no matter the consequences. I don't remember the whole song, but I do remember watching my father as he listened to it. Sometimes he would get teary-eyed when it played. I remember that. My father wasn't one to cry. He was a tough guy. But like those pictures of muscle-bound dudes holding kittens, he had a soft side. He was a good father. I remember that, too. I know that. I wonder how different my life would have been if he hadn't died.

*And the world will be better for this,
That one man, scorned and covered with scars,
Still strove with his last ounce of courage . . .*

I suppose I was living out my father's impossible dream.

The truth was, my heart hurt. Something told me that I wasn't going to come back from this trip. That's the main reason why I couldn't let Taylor read my thoughts, and why I finally learned how to stop her from reading my mind. It's a kind of pulse I focus around my temples, like jamming a radio signal. Still, it takes effort and concentration, and I was just too tired to worry about that kind of crap right then. I had too many other things to occupy my mind. Way too many things.

* * *

Lately I've been wondering where Wade is—you know, the whole death thing. Life after life. Where do we go after we die?

Or is this it and when we're done, we're done? I don't know. It's possible that Wade and my father are hanging out right now, watching us. Cheering us on. Maybe. It's weird to think about that. But it's possible. I guess one day everyone finds out what death is about.

* * *

The way things were looking, I might be finding out sooner than I hoped.



Our plane stopped in Tokyo on our way to Taiwan. Tanner and Tessa tried to talk Gervaso into letting us stay for a few hours to get some decent sushi. Their favorite restaurant sends sushi around on a conveyor belt. It sounded kind of fun, but Gervaso wasn't going for it. He said we had a strict schedule to keep and we needed to be ready for Welch.

Gervaso said, "It's like this: imagine a group of hunters on horseback with dogs chasing a fox. We're going to ride in and scoop up the fox. Best we're not eating sushi in Tokyo when the dogs tree it."

Pretty good story, I thought.

* * *

The sun was setting as we landed in Taiwan. It wasn't the same place we'd landed before. This time we were north in Taipei. As we got off the plane, we saw a familiar face.

"Ben!" Taylor shouted.

"*Hwan ying, Peng youmen,*" he said. "Welcome, my friends."

We took turns embracing him. He looked surprisingly well considering all he'd been through since we'd last seen him—mainly evading the Taiwanese police and military.

"I was so pleased to learn your mother and friends were safe at the ranch," he said to me.

"So were we," I said. "The . . ." I hesitated. I remembered that we weren't supposed to speak the word "Elgen" in public. "*They* destroyed the ranch. It was burned to the ground."

"Yes. I was told. But our friends were saved."

"Yes. They were saved."

"Now you have a new mission. There are many of the enemy in Taiwan right now. Too many. They are working with the Taiwanese army and the Taiwanese police to find the man."

"Do you know where he is?" I asked.

"He is south of us. I do not know exactly where, but we know the city. Tomorrow he will contact us and we will rescue him and get him out of Taiwan."

"What city?" Ostin asked.

"It is near the city of Changhua."

"Changhua," Ostin repeated. "Also called Bamboo City and the county seat of Changhua County. Well known for its landmark, an eighty-five-foot-tall statue of Buddha. It was once home to the Babuza aboriginal tribe and was owned by the Dutch East India Company."

Ben looked at me. "How does he know these things?"

I shrugged. "He's Ostin."

"Yes. He is awesome."

I didn't correct him. "When do we go to Changhua?"

"I will drive you there tonight."

* * *

There were more of us now than the previous time we'd been in Taiwan, and anytime we moved, we required two vans. Ben drove one, Gervaso the other. We kept together, with Ben in front leading the way.

The drive to Changhua was about two and a half hours along the western coast, and it was late at night when we arrived.

"What hotel are we staying at?" McKenna asked.

"No hotel," Ben said. "House."

The house Ben took us to was on the outskirts of Changhua and surrounded by rice paddies. It looked more like a building than a residence, which is common in Taiwan. It was three stories high and made of concrete covered with tile. It was part of a complex of a dozen similar structures, though only two of the buildings looked occupied.

"We are here," Ben said. "Please be quiet. We do not want neighbors to notice so many people. Especially foreigners."

Without talking we got our bags and went inside. Ben switched on just one light on the main floor, leaving most of the room dark. The place didn't really look lived in. The only furniture on the first floor was a table with four chairs, a computer desk, and a file cabinet.

"Girls on second floor, boys on third floor," Ben said. "Gervaso, there is a room there for you and me."

"Thank you," Gervaso said.

We all walked up one flight to where the girls were staying. I kissed Taylor good night, then went up to the third floor with the rest of the guys. Unlike the girls' level there were no beds, just thin, woven bamboo mats laid over the marble tile floor.

"Nice," Tanner said. "Nothing like sleeping on a rock floor."

"Beats Cell 25," Zeus said.

"Hell beats Cell 25," I said.

Tanner frowned. "How is that supposed to make me feel better about sleeping on a rock floor?"

* * *

Like the safe house we'd stayed at in Kaohsiung, there was a stairway that led to the roof. I guess that's pretty common in Taiwan. People don't hang out on their roofs in America so much. I'm not sure that they do in Taiwan, either, but at least you have that option.

I claimed a mat by throwing my bag onto it. Then Jack and I went up onto the roof to look around. The night air was cool and moist, and even though it was dark, we could see the silhouette of the eighty-five-foot Buddha sitting on a mountain in the distance.

Neither of us spoke for a while. Then Jack said, "I can't believe we're back here."

I continued looking out into the horizon. "Fight the Elgen, see the world."

Jack turned to me. "You're really glowing."

"I know. I just keep getting more electric."

"I've tried to imagine what that must feel like."

"It's bizarre. Sometimes I can feel electricity crackle inside me."

He looked at me quizzically. "That must feel really weird."

"Yeah." I took a deep breath. "So you've been pretty quiet about things. What do you think about this mission?"

He hesitated for a moment, then said, "I think that if you have something hard to do, it's better to focus on the task at hand than the outcome."

"Sounds like something Coach Dibble would say."

"Dibble was always saying junk like that. 'Don't beat them, Vranes, just sink the basket you're shooting.' He said that my freshman year before he cut me from the team." Jack looked me in the eyes, and his voice turned softer. "Speaking of shooting, you know I would take a bullet for you."

His words shook me. "I'd rather you didn't."

"I'd rather not either, but if it comes to that . . ."

"If it comes to that, I'll deflect it," I said. "I can't lose another friend."

Even in the darkness I could see a shadow cross his face. "Like Wade."

"He was a hero," I said.

"I prefer my heroes alive," Jack said.

“Sometimes it’s dying that makes them a hero.”

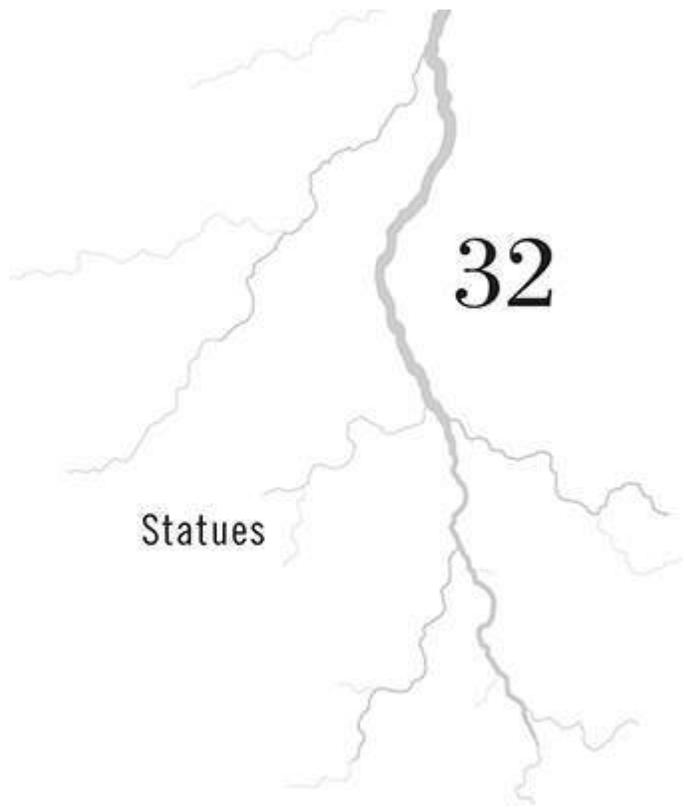
“No,” Jack said. “It’s acting courageously in the face of death that makes someone a hero. Dying is *superfluous*.”

I looked at him for a moment; then we suddenly both grinned.

“That’s a pretty good word,” I said.

“Yeah. I heard Ostin say it. I have no idea if I used it right.”

We both laughed. “Come on,” I said. “Let’s get some sleep.”



We got to sleep in the next morning, which was good because it took me like three hours to fall asleep. Around ten o'clock Ben brought us breakfast: sweet sesame-seed biscuits with honey inside and hot soy milk. It probably doesn't sound that good, but it was. Or, as the Taiwanese like to say, *Fei chang bu tswu*. Extremely not bad.

Ben said there were a lot of Elgen in the area, so Gervaso didn't want us wandering around. After breakfast Taylor and I went up to the roof. It reminded me of our last night in Taiwan—the night we were told Timepiece Ranch had been attacked by the Elgen.

The city's traffic was ridiculously loud, as if constantly honking your horn was a requirement. I'd been through some seriously dangerous things, but driving in Taiwan would probably rate high on that list.

I tore apart a cardboard box and laid it down on the gravel roof floor for Taylor and me to sit on. Taylor pulled her knees in to her

chest. She was quiet, as if she had a lot on her mind.

“What are you thinking about?” I finally asked.

“I don’t want to tell you.”

“Us again?” I hesitantly asked.

She reached over and touched me. “No, it’s just . . . I had another one of my bizarre dreams last night.” She looked back down at her feet. “As usual, I have no idea what it means.”

“Tell me about it.”

“We were in Taiwan. All of us were standing in front of a school.”

“What kind of school?”

“I don’t know, like a high school or something. All the students were Chinese and wearing, like, sailor uniforms, you know? The weird thing is, so was McKenna. She looked just like them. And there was some American guy I didn’t know; I think it might have been Welch. Then there was an Elgen army. They were about to get us, but suddenly everyone turned into statues. No one was moving.” She looked into my eyes. “Except you and some girl. The two of you were just walking around between us.”

“A Taiwanese girl?”

“No, she was American. She was our age, pretty, with short blond hair. And she liked you.”

“How did you know that?”

“I always know when girls like you. It’s the curse of my power.” She sighed. “What do you think it means?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“It scares me. Maybe it means that everyone’s going to die except for you. You and some mystery chick you’re going to run off with.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

Taylor looked back down at her feet. “I wish I’d stop having these dreams. It’s not like they’re helping. I get just enough information to freak me out.”

Just then Nichelle walked up the stairs. “Hey, there you are. Ian said you guys were up here.”

“There’s no such thing as privacy with Ian,” Taylor said.

“I think of that every time I shower,” Nichelle said.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re showering,” I said. “He can see through your clothes, anyway.”

“That makes me feel a lot better,” Nichelle said sardonically.

“So what’s up?” I asked.

“Gervaso says to hurry down. It’s almost time to go for Welch.”

“How far do we have to go?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t know.” As we walked to the stairway, Nichelle turned back and said, “All Gervaso told us is that we’re meeting Welch in front of a school.”



By the time we got down to the first floor, everyone else was already gathered. Gervaso and Ben stood next to each other on one side of the room, looking at a map. They both looked up as we came down.

“We’re here,” Nichelle said.

“That is everyone,” Ben said.

“All right,” Gervaso said, looking around the room. “Everyone listen up. I just got off the phone with Welch. He’s ready to surrender to us. This might be tricky. We know that the Elgen are in the area. Ben has seen them, and Welch said they’ve been tracking him for some time now and they’re getting close.

“Keep this in mind. Our number one priority isn’t rescuing Welch. It’s to make sure that this isn’t a trap. That’s why we’re meeting in a public place.

“The plan is to meet in front of the Cheng Gung High School near the center of town. As soon as the bell rings, the students will flood the front of the school to go home. Welch will be hiding somewhere near the school. Once there is a crowd, he will walk out with the students.” He turned toward McKenna. “McKenna, we have a high school uniform for you. You will blend in with the rest of the students.”

Taylor shook her head. “It’s just like my dream.”

I frowned. “Exactly like your dream. I need to tell Gervaso about it.”

Ostin said proudly, “The part about McKenna was my idea!”

McKenna dramatically crossed her arms and turned back to him. “Why, because we Chinese all look alike?”

“Well, you do,” Ostin said. “Genetically speaking, you have the same hue of hair color, dark-pigment irises, an unusual relativity of height and . . .”

McKenna glared at him.

“But not you,” he said. “You are one in a billion.”

McKenna smiled.

“He’s getting so much better,” Taylor said softly.

Gervaso continued. “McKenna, you will find Welch and lead him back to where we are waiting. That way we are in charge of the situation. If Ian, or any of us, sees anything suspicious, we’ll call off the mission and leave Welch to himself.” He looked at his watch. “We have one hour and forty-eight minutes until the bell rings. McKenna’s uniform is on its way. We leave in one hour.

“We won’t be coming back here, so get your things packed up and have them waiting by the door. Once we have Welch, we’ll be going directly back to the airport to leave the country. Any questions?”

Tanner raised his hand. “If we don’t rescue Welch, are we still going to try to steal the *Joule*?”

Gervaso looked at him. “As of now, the plan is to steal the *Joule* no matter what.”

“Even if it’s impossible?”

Gervaso looked angry. “Of course not. None of us has a death wish. Now go get your things. You’re dismissed.”

As we turned to walk away, Ostin said, "I wish Tanner would keep his mouth shut."

Tanner overheard him. "Maybe I'm trying to save your little life, Einstein."

"Knock it off," I said.

"Why did you even come?" Zeus asked.

"Yeah," Tessa said. "If you're already chickening out, you should just go home to your family."

Tanner looked at us all sadly, then said softly, "You guys are my family." He turned and went up the stairs alone.

None of us knew what to say to that.

* * *

An hour later we all met back downstairs. McKenna was dressed in a schoolgirl uniform that looked like a sailor outfit: a navy-blue skirt, knee-high white stockings, and a white blouse with a broad blue-and-white collar, with a matching navy tie. There were Chinese characters above her left breast, presumably the name of the high school. She didn't look happy about being in uniform.

"If anyone says anything, I'll melt you," she said.

Ostin shrugged. "I think you look cute."

I walked up to Gervaso. "I need to tell you something. Alone."

"All right." We walked into his bedroom and he shut the door. "What's up?"

"This is going to sound a little weird, but Taylor's been having these premonitions that come true."

"What kind of premonitions?"

"Like she had a dream that Timepiece Ranch was attacked by fire-breathing dragons just before the Elgen torched it. She also dreamed that her father was shot by deer hunters the day before it happened."

Gervaso looked at me with concern. "Did she have a dream about what we're doing today?"

"Yeah. She dreamed that we went for Welch in front of a school and that McKenna was dressed up like one of the students."

". . . Just like we are planning."

“Yeah.”

“Did she see anything else?”

“The Elgen found us.”

Gervaso looked even more concerned. “How did her dream end?”

“This is the part that was most weird. She said that suddenly everyone was frozen like statues. Everyone but me.”

“Frozen? As in dead?”

“She didn’t say ‘dead.’”

Gervaso looked down a moment to think. When he looked back up, he asked, “What do you think we should do?”

“I don’t know. We need Welch.”

“Yeah, we do.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. Then I said, “I just wanted to warn you that we need to be careful. If her dream is real, we’re going to run into Elgen.”

He slowly nodded. “All right. Thank you. I’ll keep Ian especially close.” He took a deep breath. “Now we better go. We’re running out of time.”

* * *

We climbed back into the same vans we had arrived in and quickly drove off.

“How far to the school?” I asked.

“Not far,” Ben said. “Maybe just fifteen minutes.”

“Fifteen minutes,” I repeated. I wondered if we were driving into a trap.



The traffic was relatively light as we made our way downtown. When we were a block from the school, Ben said, “There is the school ahead of us. We are going to first drive pass the school . . .” He hesitated. “No, *past* the school, then drive around the block and park the van on the north side of the school. Gervaso will park across the street near the Yin Hang.”

“The what?” I asked.

“The bank,” Ostin said.

As we continued ahead, I looked back to see Gervaso turn left into the bank’s parking lot. A moment later we passed a four-story, ivory-colored stone-facade building in the middle of the block.

“That is the Cheng Gung Gau Sywe,” Ben said. “Success High School.”

“I hope it is,” McKenna said.

I looked around but saw no one other than the people walking on the sidewalk in front of the school. I turned to Taylor. "Look familiar?" She frowned. "This is the same place."

"Ian sees nothing," Gervaso said over our radio.

"Okay," Ben said. We drove past the school, then took a right on the next street, drove to the corner, then took another right, driving past the back of the school. The grounds were empty. No sign of Elgen, at least.

A moment later Ben pulled the van up to the north side of the school. He killed the engine and looked back. "McKenna, the bell will ring in just six minutes. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Welch is tall and the only American, I think. He will stand next to the flagpole. It is past that food truck." He pointed to a large white truck parked to the north of the school's front doors. It had Chinese writing on it. "He is wearing a light blue shirt. When you see him, do not look at him, just walk past him and tell him to follow you."

"Wait, we're not sending her alone," I said.

"Yes, that is the plan. It is most safe that way."

"It's not safest for her," Ostin said.

"That's not going to work for me, either," Taylor said. "I'm going with her."

"But they will see you," Ben said, his voice rising. "That is why we have McKenna in a uniform."

"We won't be with her," I said. "We'll just keep in the background."

"You are not Chinese. You will stand out." Ben glanced at his watch. "We are almost out of time."

I slid open the van door. "Ben, it's okay. I promise."

Ben looked frustrated but helpless. "I do not like this. Do not get caught. You have thirty seconds until bell. Twenty seconds. Ten seconds." The school bell rang. "McKenna, go now!"

McKenna glanced at Ostin. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," Ostin said to her.

* * *

The front doors of the school opened, and students dressed in matching uniforms poured out like water. McKenna was dressed exactly like them, and we quickly lost track of her, which, I suppose, was the point.

We continued walking toward the flagpole. I felt like a salmon trying to swim upstream against the current of kids. Ben was right, we didn't look like them. Still we were lost in the sheer number of bodies.

As we got closer to the school, I saw a tall American man walking out from the shadow of the school. I don't know where he came from, but seeing him gave me chills. He was taller than I expected, more powerfully built. He wore slacks and a light blue, short-sleeved linen shirt.

He fell in with a stream of students that were walking toward an aluminum flagpole with a Taiwanese flag. He suddenly stopped, casually looked around, and then began walking toward us.

"There's McKenna," Ostin said. "They must have connected. She's about ten feet in front of him."

"Keep your eye on her," I said.

"Look at him," Taylor said. "It's like looking at the devil."

"Hatch is the devil," I said. "Welch is just his henchman."

"His *chief* henchman," Ostin said. "The right hand of the devil." He turned to me. "Do you think it's a trap?"

"I wouldn't be here if it was," I said. "Taylor, does any of this seem familiar?"

"Something's not right," she said.

"What's that?"

"Where are the Elgen?"

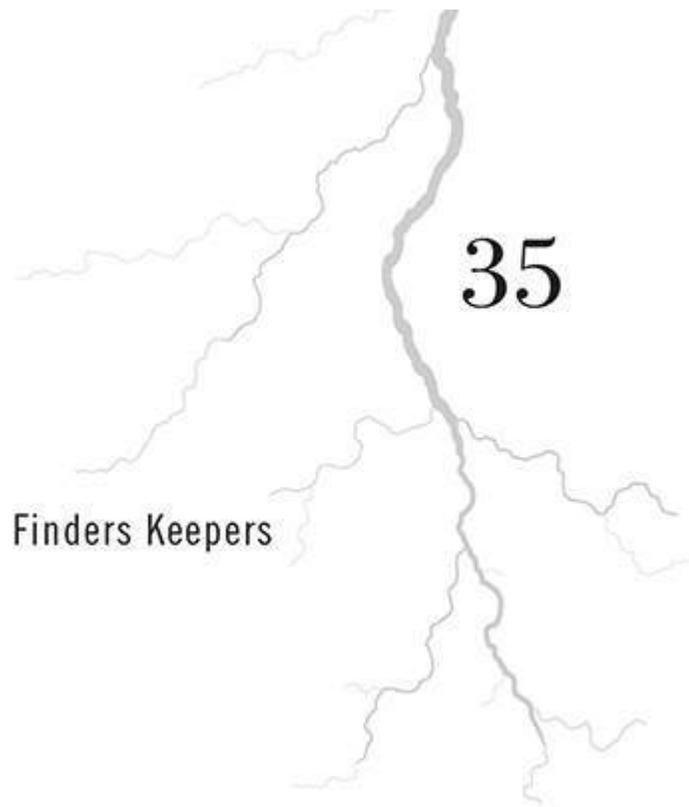
Suddenly McKenna froze. She clutched her chest, then fell to the ground.

"Do you feel that?" I asked.

Taylor was trembling. "Yes. How can they do that?"

"What is it?" Ostin asked.

Taylor looked at him with pain in her eyes. "RESATs."



Apparently, the Elgen had developed a new way to RESAT us without darts or boxes. “This just keeps getting better,” I mumbled.

McKenna dropped to her knees, then fell to her side on the asphalt, moaning and clutching her ribs. Three Taiwanese policemen walked up behind her and Welch.

“Cops!” Ostin said.

I’m pretty sure that Welch didn’t see the police as he stopped to help McKenna.

“They’re after them,” Ostin said. “We’ve got to help her.”

“We’re walking into RESATs,” Taylor said. “We’ll be worthless.”

“They won’t affect me,” Ostin said.

“I think I can do it,” I said. “I’m getting so electric. Go tell Ben to call Gervaso.”

“Okay.” As Taylor ran back toward our van, Gervaso and his group began moving toward Welch as well.

“Ian must have already spotted them,” Ostin said.

“We’ll need help,” I said. “Especially Jack’s and Gervaso’s. Let’s go.”

Ostin and I ran toward McKenna. When we were about twenty yards away from her, the back door of the food truck we were hiding behind slid open. More than a dozen Elgen guards jumped out the back.

“This way,” I said. We dropped to our hands and knees, and Ostin and I crawled under the truck toward McKenna.

“Déjà vu,” Ostin said. “Just like Peru.”

We stopped at the back of the truck just a few yards from the Elgen guards.

Then two other guards, one of them in the uniform of an EGG and wearing a mind helmet, walked up from a different direction. He took out a gun and held it to Welch’s head.

“Did you really think you could escape us?”

Welch said nothing.

The other Elgen guard was dressed in the uniform of a Zone Captain and also wore a mind helmet. He pointed a gun at McKenna. “Tell your friends to give themselves up.”

In spite of her pain McKenna said, “Tell them yourself, loser.”

The guard took a small control from his pocket and turned a knob. McKenna screamed out.

“I can make it worse,” he said.

Ostin started crawling forward.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“I’ve got to stop them.” He stood and ran toward them, waving his arms. “Stop it! Leave her alone.”

“That was stupid,” I said.

The guard, with an amused expression, pointed his gun at Ostin. “You must be Ostin.”

“Let her go!” Ostin shouted.

“This isn’t catch and release,” he said. “It’s finders keepers. Now kneel down next to her, or I’ll kill you both.”

“Yes, sir,” Ostin said as he knelt on the ground.

I watched the rest of our group slowly creep forward. I had no way to warn them about the RESATs.

“They’re coming, sir,” one of the guards said.

“We’ve got them covered,” the first guard replied.

That’s when I saw the full regiment of guards coming from outside the school grounds. There were at least a hundred of them. It *was* a trap, and we’d walked right into it.

When Gervaso’s group was within thirty yards all the electricians fell to their knees. I could feel a wave of RESAT wash over me, powerful enough to jolt me, like a slipped dental drill. But just for a second. It didn’t stop me.

“You are completely surrounded!” a Squad Captain shouted. “Don’t try to escape or we’ll kill your friends. Hands on your heads. You there!” he shouted at Gervaso. He pointed his gun at McKenna. “Bring everyone in, or I start shooting.”

Gervaso looked furious but obeyed. “Come on, everyone. Put your hands up.”

Everyone had been captured except for me, Taylor, and Ben. The EGG looked pleased. “Look at this. I swung for a base hit and got a grand slam. The general will be celebrating tonight.”

It *was* a trap, only Welch wasn’t a part of it. They had set the trap for him, and we had foolishly rushed into it.

“Let them go,” Welch said. “I’m the one you want.”

“Yeah, I’m not going to do that,” Daines said.

“How did you find me?” Welch asked.

The EGG looked at Welch with disdain. “It wasn’t easy, after you sent us on all those goose chases with your different phones. But in the end it was your cleverness that was your undoing. It occurred to me that you might still have more phones.

“We traced the phone we captured back to the shop in Kangshan where you purchased them, and with a little persuasion, we got all the phone numbers you had. Then I programmed our systems to look for the ones you hadn’t used yet. The very second you activated one, we were notified. It still took a while to find you, since you don’t stay in the same place long, but this time we were close, just patiently waiting.”

“So now what?” Welch asked.

“General Hatch will be so happy to see you.” He looked around. “All of you.”

“I thought there was a death order,” Welch said.

“There is. But I couldn’t exactly open fire around all these schoolchildren. We might accidentally hit a few of them, and you know what kind of negative press that would generate. So we’re going to take you back alive, and I’m going to give the general the pleasure of—”

Daines froze midsentence. Actually, everyone around him froze: Welch, the students, the guards, everyone on the entire street. A car driving by slammed into a stopped car, and cars began stacking up behind them. A stuck car horn blared.

Everyone was frozen except for me. My electricity just amplified. It took me a moment to realize that I wasn’t the only one unaffected.

A young, blond woman about my age walked confidently through the midst of the people, looking as calm as if she were walking through a museum’s statuary.

As I climbed out from under the truck, she turned and looked at me. She wore a large smile on her face. “Michael Vey, I presume. I wondered if it would work on you.”

I intensified my electricity. “Who are you?”

“Don’t shock me,” she said. “We’re on the same team.”

“I know my team. I don’t know you.”

“But I know you. And I’m a huge fan. My name is Cassy. The voice sent me.”



“We’ve got to turn off the RESATs,” I said.

“It’s coming from those two,” Cassy said, pointing at the EGG and the Zone Captain.

I walked over and pried the RESAT devices from their frozen hands as they just stared at me helplessly. I pulsed hard enough to make the RESATs blow, then tossed them onto the ground.

“Where’s Tessa?” Cassy asked.

I looked around. Tessa was frozen next to Zeus. “She’s over there,” I said, pointing to her.

“I’m holding a lot of people right now. I could use a little help.”

“She’s the one with the light red hair.”

“Of course,” Cassy said. “I’ve only seen pictures of her. But she was a lot younger in them.” Cassy reached out toward Tessa, who suddenly moved, falling over.

“Okay, that hurt,” Tessa said, getting to her feet.

“I’m sorry. I just froze everyone until I could figure out who was who. Could you give me a hand?”

Tessa’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you? And how do you know what I can do?”

“I’m with the voice. Electroclan 101. I know everything about all of you.” She looked back at me. “We need to hurry this up. People are watching.”

I glanced at the buildings around us. People were hanging out their windows pointing.

“Okay,” I said. I looked in EGG Daines’s frightened face. He could only move his eyes. I lifted my hand in front of him and let my electricity spark loudly.

“I could just electrocute you,” I said. “And be done with you. That’s what you or Hatch or the rest of you Elgen losers would do. Isn’t it?”

He blinked.

“. . . But there are better ways of dealing with Elgen.” I turned back to Cassy. “Unfreeze the rest of my people.”

“No problem.”

Suddenly everyone started moving again. Ostin groaned out as he fell over to the ground next to McKenna. I helped them both up.

“Are you okay?” I asked McKenna.

She looked to still be in pain but nodded. “It just took the wind out of me.”

Cassy said, “Michael, is that . . . Taylor?”

I looked behind me as Taylor and Ben ran up to us.

“Yes. And Ben.”

“I know Ben,” she said.

When Taylor was at my side, Cassy extended her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Taylor. I’m Cassy. I’m with the voice.”

“Hi,” Taylor said, looking at her warily.

“Hello, Cassy,” Ben said.

“Benjamin, what’s up?”

“Same old crazy.”

She laughed. It’s like she had forgotten we were in the middle of a crisis.

“Taylor, I need your help,” I said. I removed Daines’s and the Zone Captain’s mind helmets. Not surprisingly, neither of the men seemed very happy about this. I think they would have bitten me if they could. Definitely would have.

I turned back to Taylor. “Remember what you did to the hunters?”

“Yes.”

“Do it again. Scramble them. Permanently.”

“With pleasure.”

Taylor looked at Daines, then reached her hand out until it was an inch from his forehead, and concentrated. In spite of his still being frozen, he began to tremble. When Taylor finished, the look in Daines’s eyes was different. Vacant.

Taylor touched his shoulder, then turned back to me. “We don’t need to worry about him anymore. He doesn’t even know his own name.”

“As long as we’ve got a blank slate here, you might as well program him,” I said.

“For what?”

“Something peaceful.”

She nodded, putting her hand back out. “After you are free, you will buy all the men in these black uniforms an ice cream, then take them to the beach to play volleyball. It’s a lot of fun.”

“. . . Fun,” he said, sounding like a robot.

“Now him,” I said, looking at the Zone Captain.

The Zone Captain looked terrified. Somehow he got a word out. “Freak.”

“That’s not nice,” Taylor said. “I’m not a freak. But I used to be a cheerleader. That was kind of freaky.” She put her hand just an inch from the Elgen’s forehead. “This is for what you did to McKenna.” She closed her eyes, and the man began shaking. When she stopped, he had the same blank expression on his face as the EGG.

Suddenly Jack walked up to the man and punched him, knocking him over.

“Scumbag Elgen,” he said. Then he walked around punching each of the terrified frozen guards.

“Is someone going to stop him?” Tessa asked.

“Why?” Zeus replied.

“Hmm,” Tessa said. “Hadn’t thought of it that way.”

Taylor looked down at Welch. “What about him?”

Welch, who was still frozen, just stared at her without emotion.

“I need you to lie detector him,” I said.

Taylor touched Welch’s forehead. “Go ahead.”

I said to Welch, “Did you have anything to do with this trap?”

“No.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Taylor said. “He’s glad to see us.”

“Especially with the Elgen here,” Jack said as he walked back to us, rubbing his red knuckles. “I should have used a stick or something.”

I turned to Cassy. “You can release him. We can go.”

Welch’s shoulders dropped, and he breathed in deeply. “Thank you.” He looked at me. “The last time I saw you, you were embarrassing my forces at the Taiwan Starxource plant.”

“You were at the plant?”

“I was in charge of protecting the plant and catching you. Why do you think Hatch had me arrested?”

“Really, guys. We’ve got to go,” Cassy said. “I can’t do this much longer.”

“Let’s go!” I shouted to everyone. I turned to Cassy. “Are you alone?”

“Just little me.”

“Come on, we’re this way.”

“Wait,” Gervaso said. “Michael, I want you, Taylor, and . . .”

“Cassy,” Cassy said. “Can we please hurry this up?”

“Cassy, come with us. We need to talk to Welch. Zeus and Tessa, go with Ben.”

“Got it,” Tessa said. “Come on, lightning bolt.”

“I don’t want to be in the same car as Welch, anyway,” Zeus said.

“Can we go with you?” Ostin asked.

“We’re full,” Gervaso said.

“It’s good,” Jack said. “Abi and I can switch cars.”

“All right,” Gervaso said. He turned to Welch. “Come with me.”

We followed him back across the street to their van, which was still parked at the bank. Gervaso unlocked the doors, then said to Welch,

“Do you have any weapons?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gun. He offered it to Gervaso. “Just this.”

Gervaso took the gun. “Anything else?”

“No.”

Gervaso looked at Ian.

“No, that was it,” Ian said.

“Okay. Ride up front with me,” Gervaso said to Welch. Welch got into the front passenger seat.

“Taylor.” Gervaso leaned forward to whisper to her. “I want you to sit behind Welch and monitor him. We don’t know what’s going through his head, but I suspect he’s volatile.”

“Yes, sir.”

He walked back to the driver seat. Nichelle opened the side door, and Cassy climbed in first and slid down the first seat of the van. I got in after her, with Taylor next to me and directly behind Welch.

Ostin, McKenna, Nichelle, and Ian sat in the middle and backseats.

“Are we all here?” Gervaso asked from the front.

“Everyone’s here,” Ian said. “Jack, Abi, Zeus, Tanner, and Tessa went with Ben.”

Sweat was streaming down Cassy’s face. “Seriously, I’m losing it. We’ve got to go.”

“Shut the doors,” Gervaso said, starting the van. “Let’s get out of here.”

Ian slid the side door shut, and Gervaso jerked the van forward out of the bank parking lot into traffic, eliciting a few horns. As he did so, Cassy let out a loud gasp. “I’m done.”

After we were away, Ostin said, “Your power is really amazing.”

Cassy took a deep breath in and out. “Thank you. It’s exhausting.”

“McKenna, how are you?” Taylor asked.

“I’m feeling better. That was a little terrifying.”

“Thank goodness Cassy showed up,” Ostin said. He turned back to Cassy. “How far can you keep someone frozen?”

“Just one person?”

“Yes.”

“About two kilometers. A little more than a mile. If it’s a lot of people, it depends.”

“That was a lot of people today,” I said.

“Tell me about it,” Cassy replied.

“It depends on what?” Ostin asked.

“Different variables. The weather. Obstacles. Mostly the people. Some people are just more susceptible than others.”

“It makes sense,” Ostin said. “Electricity affects people in different ways. Some people get struck by lightning and live, some die.”

“Where are we going?” Welch asked. It was weird hearing his voice.

“Taipei,” Gervaso said.

“When do we fly to America?”

“As soon as we can,” Gervaso said. “There are some important things we need to attend to first.”

“What things?” Welch asked.

“*Important* things,” Gervaso said.

Welch leaned back in his seat.

“He doesn’t know about Tuvalu,” Taylor said softly. “Why didn’t Gervaso say something?”

“It’s not the time,” I said. “Welch needs to digest things.”

Taylor asked Cassy, “How did you get to Taiwan?”

“I flew commercially. It’s not the luxury of a private jet like you guys had, but at least it was first class.”

“I guess with your power the resistance doesn’t worry too much about protecting you,” I said.

“No. I’ve never met anyone I couldn’t freeze. Except you.”

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

Cassy glanced up to the front toward Welch, then back at us. She asked in a hushed voice, “You mean, where was I born?”

“No, where did you fly here from?”

“I can’t tell you. It’s one of our secrets.”

“The voice keeps a lot of secrets,” Taylor said.

“Which is why the voice is still alive.”

“Then you’ve seen the voice?”

Cassy again glanced suspiciously at Welch, then said, “We need to keep our voices down.”

“All right,” Taylor whispered. “So have you seen him?”

“I see him every day. He’s my boss.”

“Who is he?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Taylor asked.

“Won’t. Can’t. Both. Especially with Mr. Elgen sitting six feet from me.” She looked at Taylor. “I know you could read my mind if you wanted to, but trust me, you don’t want to. For your own safety. If the Elgen knew that you knew who the voice was, they’d stop at nothing to get that information out of you.” She glanced at me. “Including killing everyone you love.”

“I get it,” Taylor said.

“After we steal the . . .” She hesitated. “I mean, after we complete our mission, I’ve been instructed to tell you everything.” She paused. “Well, *almost* everything. There are things the voice wants to tell you himself.”

Ostin asked, “How long have you been with the voice?”

“Since I was four. He’s pretty much like my father. The Elgen killed my parents, but when they tried to kidnap me, the voice and his people intervened. They were both looking for me at the same time.”

“How long ago did the voice start the resistance?” I asked.

“The voice didn’t—” She stopped herself and again nervously glanced toward the front. “I’ve said too much.”

“There’s someone above the voice?” I whispered.

Cassy hesitated. “No.”

Taylor glanced at me.

“I’ve said too much,” Cassy said again. “We can talk later.” She leaned back against the side of the van.

The rest of the trip was mostly quiet except for Ostin, who kept grilling Cassy about her power. Ostin can think up more questions than anyone else I know. I suppose that’s one of the reasons he knows so much—he asks so much.

Gervaso drove us to a hotel called the Hotel Midtown Taipei, which, I figure, must have been in the middle of Taipei City to get that name. Ben must have known a shorter route to our destination, because he was already there when we arrived, and the van was

empty. Gervaso parked next to the van, then turned back to us. "Dinner in the ballroom at eight."

Ben walked up to Gervaso's window.

"Where is everyone?" Gervaso asked.

"They have gone to their rooms," Ben said. "I have your room keys."

"Where are our bags?" Taylor asked.

"Your bags will be in your rooms," he said.

Ben walked around to the curb while one of the bell captains opened the door for Welch, then the side door. As we got out, Ben handed us our keys. He said to Cassy, "You are alone."

"No worries," she said. "I'm used to it."

As usual Ostin and I were together, as were Taylor and McKenna. Cassy got off on the floor before the rest of ours. The tenth.

We rode to our floor, then got off. As we walked up the hall to our room, I said to Taylor, "Is Cassy the girl you saw in your dream?"

"Yes. And she was lying."

"About what?"

"About there being someone else besides the voice. There's someone above him."

"You shouldn't read her mind."

"I wasn't trying to. Her lie was so obvious that I couldn't not. I'm surprised you didn't see it."

"I knew she was lying," I said. "But if there's someone above the voice, I can see why she wouldn't want to share that."

"I think she would share everything with *you*."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I told you, it's just like my dream. She likes you."

"No, she doesn't."

Taylor's eyes narrowed. "I'm not being a jealous, crazy girlfriend; I'm telling you what I know." Her brow furrowed. "Or maybe I am being crazy jealous, but I'm still telling the truth. If it wasn't the truth, why would I be jealous?"

"I don't know why you would be jealous."

"Because she's pretty and cool and powerful, and she thinks you're a rock star. Even Ostin was slobbering all over her."

I stopped walking and turned toward her. "I didn't notice she was pretty."

Taylor rolled her eyes. "Really. You didn't notice."

"I really didn't."

"How could you not notice?"

"Because I wasn't looking. Someone already owns my heart."

Her expression changed with my response. "Who would that be?"

"Do I need to say it?"

Taylor took my hand. "Yes. I kind of need to hear it right now."

"You, Taylor Ridley, own my heart. Forever."

Taylor leaned forward and kissed me. "Sorry, Michael. I'm just feeling really insecure."

"I know."

"You own my heart, too," she said. "You always will. No matter what happens."



Ostin and McKenna were going for a walk in the city, and Taylor wanted to take a shower, so I went to my room to rest. It was dark when Ostin returned to get me for dinner. He had McKenna and Taylor with him. I splashed some water onto my face; then we met up with the rest of the Electroclan on the hotel's fourteenth floor for dinner.

The dining room was modern and clean and took more than half of the entire floor. Against the wall was a massive buffet. Fortunately, we didn't look out of place, because there were as many foreigners as there were Chinese. More, in fact.

Even though we blended in, we still kept separated in small groups just to be safe. Taylor and I got in line together at the back of the entrée line. The food was mostly Chinese. There was duck, chicken, pork, noodles, *bao dz*, egg drop soup, and hot-and-sour soup with curdled pig's blood. (I'm told that's the only way to eat it.) They also

had *syau lung bao* dumplings, one of the foods I liked and remembered from our last visit to Taiwan.

"You love those things," Taylor said.

"Love them," I said. "So does Ostin. I'll have to tell him."

"Look, they also have swamp eel."

"I just threw up in my mouth."

She grinned. "Just kidding."

While I was lifting dumplings onto my plate, a redheaded American woman on my right side leaned toward me and pointed at the *syau lung bao*. "What do you suppose those are?"

I looked at her. "They're called *syau lung bao*. They're dumplings."

"What's inside them?"

"They have pork and kind of a broth inside. They sometimes call them soup dumplings."

"That sounds interesting. Are they good?"

Considering that my plate was full of them, it was a dumb question. *No, they're sculpted vomit. That's why I filled my plate with them.* "Yes, ma'am. I like them."

"Then I guess I'll just have to try some. Thank you."

I started to move down the line when she asked, "Are you American?"

Another dumb question. "Yes, ma'am."

"Me too. Where are you from?"

"Idaho," I said.

"No way! I'm from Idaho. What city?"

Now I was feeling a little nervous. "Meridian."

"I'm from Eagle! We're practically neighbors. We might have met before. What a small world."

Taylor glanced at me anxiously.

"Sometimes it is," I said.

"What brings you to Taiwan?"

"I'm just visiting," I said. "I'm with a school group. . . ."

"Which school?"

I hesitated. "It's just a little private school. You probably haven't heard of it."

"My son went to a private school in Meridian. Which one is it?"

I swallowed. “. . . The Liss Academy.”

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t think I’ve heard of that one.”

Before she could ask another question, I said, “What are you doing here?”

“My husband’s here on business. His company manufactures steam turbines for electric plants. There’s a really large power plant in the southern part of Taiwan that just broke down. We’re headed there to . . .” Her eyes suddenly went blank. Then she pointed at the *syau lung bao* and said, “Excuse me, do you know what these are?”

I looked over at Taylor. She slightly nodded.

“They’re called *syau lung bao* dumplings,” I said. “They have pork and soup in them. They’re really good. You should have some.”

“That does sound good. I guess I’ll have to try some.”

“Great, have a good dinner,” I said. Taylor and I quickly slipped away.

* * *

After dinner we all gathered in Gervaso and Jack’s room on the seventh floor. Jack and Gervaso still hadn’t eaten, as they were talking with Welch, and Ostin and McKenna brought them boxes of food.

Taylor, Tessa, and I sat next to Welch on the edge of the bed.

Again, Gervaso wanted Taylor to monitor Welch’s thoughts without him knowing it. The room was pretty crowded, and so it didn’t seem weird that Taylor was slightly touching him.

Tanner was sitting by himself against the wall by the closet. He’d been pretty quiet since his last outburst. I felt bad for him. Also, I noticed that Cassy wasn’t there, but I didn’t say anything. I figured it would only bother Taylor that I noticed.

“Mr. Welch has been telling us what he knows about the Elgen movement,” Gervaso said. “Especially after they attacked the ranch.”

“Call me David,” Welch said. “The Elgen thought they had destroyed the resistance.”

“They came close,” Gervaso said. “Fortunately, we were tipped off. The ranch was deserted before the Elgen forces arrived.”

Welch looked ashamed. “That was fortunate.”

“It was more than fortunate. It was prepared for,” Gervaso said. “We are careful.”

“Of course.” Welch looked around the room. “Thank you again for rescuing me. When will we head back to the States?”

Gervaso looked around as if to make sure we were all prepared for Welch’s reaction. Then he said, “We’re not going back to the States. We’re headed to Tuvalu.”

Welch made no attempt to conceal his feelings. “You’re not serious . . .”

“As a heart attack,” Zeus said. He looked like he was relishing Welch’s pain.

“I’m not going to Tuvalu,” Welch said. “It’s a death trap. The entire Elgen guard is there right now. No one gets in or out of Tuvalu without Hatch’s permission. No one.”

“No one gets in or out of the Elgen Academy, the Peruvian compound, the *Ampere*, or the Taiwan Starxource plant, either,” Jack said. “But we did.”

“Notwithstanding, I can’t go back. They have a price on my head.”

“We all have prices on our heads,” Gervaso said. “You know that. You put them there.”

“Only a few of you,” Welch said, furtively glancing at me.

“What a chicken,” Zeus said.

I hadn’t realized until then just how much Zeus hated Welch. There was clearly bad history between them.

“Watch your tongue, *Frank*,” Welch said.

“What are you going to do to me, *Davey*?” Zeus retorted.

“Stop it,” I said. “Both of you. Whatever history you two have is past. We’re on the same team now.” I turned to Welch. “We’re going back to Tuvalu because of you.”

He looked at me, then Gervaso, then back at me. “I don’t understand.”

Jack said, “If it wasn’t for you, they wouldn’t be getting ready to execute Tara, Torstyn, and Quentin.”

Welch looked as if Jack had just slugged him in the stomach. “What?”

Gervaso said, "Hatch found out that the three of them helped you escape, and he has them locked up. He originally put Quentin in Cell 25. After that Quentin was locked in the monkey cage in the city square, where he'll stay for the rest of his life. Tara and Torstyn are scheduled for the rat bowl."

Welch's head dropped into his hands. When he looked up, his eyes were fierce. "I didn't know. I had no way of knowing."

"You do now," Zeus said. "Still want to run away?"

I glared at Zeus. "Not helpful, man."

Welch took a deep breath, then said, "What do you need from me?"

"We need your help rescuing them," I said. I purposely didn't tell him about the *Joule*.

"Then I'm with you."

Gervaso glanced at Taylor for confirmation. Taylor nodded in the affirmative. "We'll fly out early tomorrow morning," Gervaso said. "We leave here at oh-five-hundred hours. We'll fly to Sydney, then Fiji."

"You have a plane, then?"

"We have a jet."

Welch nodded. "Good."

"From Fiji we've arranged to stow away on one of the supply boats. We'll free Quentin first, then the others."

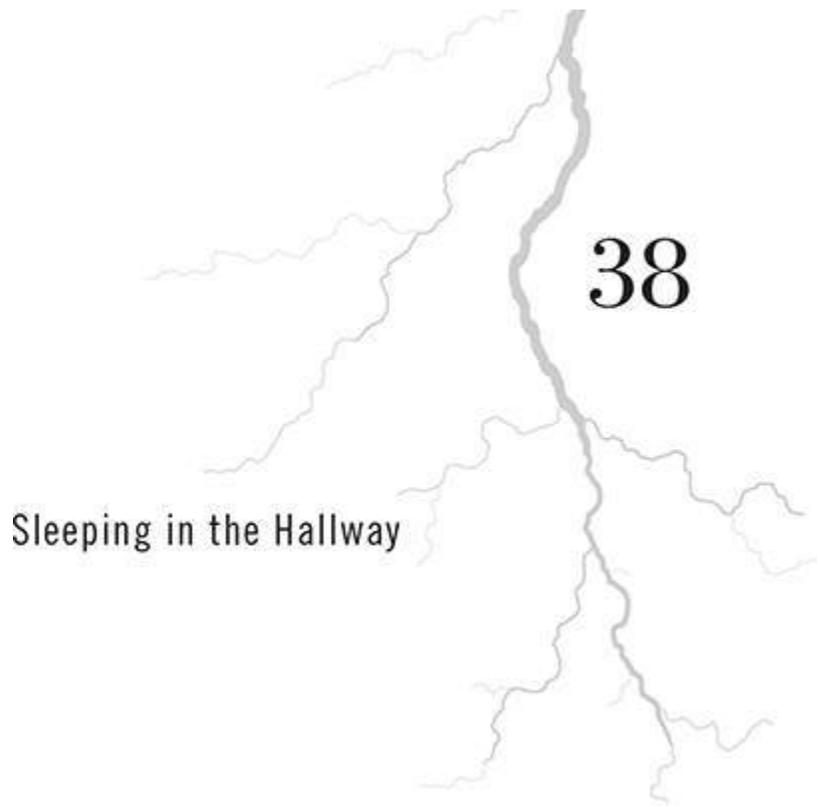
"Be aware that the Elgen have spies all around Fiji. Are you sure you can trust everyone on the boat?"

"We can trust the captain," Gervaso said. "He's a friend of mine."

"All right. I'll help however I can."

Gervaso glanced at Taylor, and she nodded again. I was glad that Welch was telling the truth. It would be good to have someone on our side who knew everything about our enemy. It was still hard to believe that a month ago he *was* the enemy.

"All right, then," Gervaso said. "We leave first thing in the morning. Try to get some sleep. You're going to need it."



Again, I didn't sleep well. I had dreams. Nightmares. To make it worse Ostin was snoring like a chain saw. At two in the morning I got up and walked out into the hall. To my surprise Taylor was standing there in the dark.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked.

"I heard you say you were coming out."

"I didn't say I was coming out."

"You thought it. Loudly."

"You could hear me?"

She nodded. "I think it has to do with how electric you've become. Do you want to go for a walk?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I'm exhausted. It's bizarre. I can't sleep but I'm exhausted."

"I know what you mean. Do you want to hang out for a while?"

"Yes."

We sat down on the floor outside my door, and I lay my head back on her shoulder.

“You’re afraid,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Me too.” She ran her hand over my cheek. “Do you think we’ll ever come back?”

I didn’t answer. At least not vocally.

After a moment she said softly, sadly, “Yeah. Me too.” She took a deep breath. “You know, part of me doesn’t care anymore.”

I looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“When my father was shot and I thought he might die, I was freaked out, but I realized that part of me was happy for him. All I could think of was how lucky he was that he didn’t have to worry anymore about the Elgen or Hatch . . . or the end of the free world.”

I closed my eyes.

After a minute she said, “Me too.”

“You too what?” I asked.

“I don’t want to lose you.”

I sighed. “Sometimes I think you’re the only reason I want to keep living.”

“Maybe love is really the only reason we have to live.”

“That’s profound,” I said.

“Maybe,” Taylor said.

The two of us fell asleep in the hall.

* * *

I woke to some Chinese guy dragging his luggage over my foot as he walked by us. He didn’t bother to say “excuse me” or whatever they say in Chinese; he just ran his bag over me like I was carpet lice. I made a lightning ball, then caught myself and threw it against the wall in front of me instead of at him.

I could see from the glowing curtained window at the far end of the corridor that the sun was beginning to rise. We would be leaving soon.

Taylor was lying on her side next to me. I leaned over and kissed her, then whispered into her ear, "We need to get ready."

She lightly groaned. Then her eyes fluttered open. "Is it time to go?"

"Soon," I said.

"Just hold me a little longer."

I lay back down and pulled her head onto my chest, and she quickly fell back asleep. I didn't sleep. I couldn't. Actually, I didn't want to. I wanted to feel every second of her next to me. What I had said in the night was true. If something happened to her, I didn't know if I would be able to go on.

As I looked at her sleeping, I said softly, "I love you." I gently slid my hand up her neck under her hair. "I would die for you."

Taylor sighed a little. Then she said in a half-asleep voice, "What?"

I pulled her in close. "Nothing," I said. "Nothing."



“Hey, Michael,” Ostin said. He was in his underwear, looking at me from out our door. “You awake?”

“I am now,” I said, taking a second to remember where I was.

“I thought you had left me. We just got a call from Gervaso. We’ve got forty minutes to eat and go.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Ostin nodded and disappeared back into our room.

I kissed Taylor on the forehead. “It’s time to wake up.”

“Do we have to?”

“This time we do.”

She groaned, then slowly pushed herself up. I sat up, stood, and then helped her up.

“What time is it?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t know. Ostin says we’ve got forty minutes. Or we did a couple of minutes ago.”

“Okay.” She leaned in and we kissed; then she stepped back. She looked like she might fall over. “I’ll see you in a little bit.”

She walked to her room and knocked on the door. McKenna opened it. “Good morning,” she said. “I was about to come looking for you.” She waved to me. “Hi, Michael.”

“Morning.”

I turned and pushed open my door and went inside to shower.

* * *

Almost a half hour later Taylor and I walked into the dining room. Gervaso was sitting at a table near the door with Jack, Abi, and Cassy. He waved us over.

“Hey, Tay,” Jack said. “Mike.”

“Hey,” Taylor said.

Cassy was smiling at me. “Good morning, Michael. Do you go by Michael or Mike?”

“Michael. I’m only Mike to Jack.”

“My man,” Jack said, sounding like Denzel Washington. “I got privileges.”

“Michael it is,” Cassy said. “I think it’s cuter, anyway.” She laughed sweetly.

Taylor shot me a look.

“I’d like to talk with you sometime. I have a lot of questions,” Cassy said.

“I’m sure there’ll be a lot of time to talk on the flight,” I said.

“Almost nine hours,” Gervaso said.

Jack groaned. “It’s really that far?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Well, we’ll definitely have time to talk,” I said.

“Speaking of time,” Gervaso said, “we need to leave in eight minutes, so eat fast.”

“Sorry,” Taylor said, glancing at Cassy. “We slept in. Together.”

Cassy bit her lower lip but said nothing. The tension between them was palpable.

“We’ll just grab a sweet roll or something,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

“There will be food on the plane too,” Gervaso said.

“Great,” I said. “Has Ostin come up yet?”

“He’s back in the corner with McKenna,” Jack said, pointing.

“Thanks. Come on, Taylor.”

We walked over and grabbed plates.

“Didn’t I tell you she liked you?” Taylor said.

“She’s just being friendly,” I said.

“Very.” She turned and walked away.

I grabbed a cherry Danish, a hard-boiled egg, some toast, and a glass of orange juice, and carried it over to where Taylor had gone, next to Ostin and McKenna. Taylor looked embarrassed.

“Ostin said he found you guys sleeping in the hall,” McKenna said.

“It was quieter than sleeping next to Ostin,” I replied.

“I talk in my sleep?” Ostin said.

“No, you snore. Like a chain saw.”

He turned to McKenna. “I don’t snore.”

“Uh, yeah, you do,” I said.

“Why are you making these cruel accusations?”

“Because I had to sleep in the hall,” I said. “And I got run over by some Chinese dude in a psychedelic green jacket. You definitely snore. If you don’t believe me, we can prove it scientifically.”

“How would you do that?”

“Easy. We could record you.”

“What, with a phone recorder?”

“No, I was thinking more of a Richter scale.”

McKenna and Taylor both laughed.

“It’s okay,” McKenna said. “Real men snore.”

Ostin smiled. Then he said to me, “Hey, you should try your Danish baked with butter. The way your mother used to make them.”

“I would if I had an oven.”

McKenna’s eyebrows rose. “Excuse me, but what am I?”

“Sorry, but I don’t usually think of you as an oven.”

“Give it to me.”

I put a pat of butter on top of my pastry and then pushed the plate to McKenna. She put her hand on it. Within seconds the butter was bubbling and the Danish was slightly toasted. She stopped and pushed the plate back to me. "There you go. Be careful, it's hot."

"Thank you."

I had only taken a few bites of my Danish when Jack walked up to our table. "Gervaso says it's time to head down."

I downed my orange juice in one gulp, then grabbed a napkin and my sweet roll, and we all walked out to the elevator. Taylor and I stopped on our floor and grabbed our bags, then went down to the lobby. Ian and Gervaso were standing near the hotel's front doors.

"That's everyone but Welch," Gervaso said.

"He's waiting for us outside," Ian said. "He's reading a newspaper."

"All right, let's go."

After we were in our vans, Welch casually put down his newspaper and walked over to our vehicle and got in. I didn't think that he was being overly cautious. If I had Hatch and his whole army after me, I'd be careful too.

The drive from the hotel to the airport took about a half hour. We set what little luggage we had near the back of the plane, then boarded.

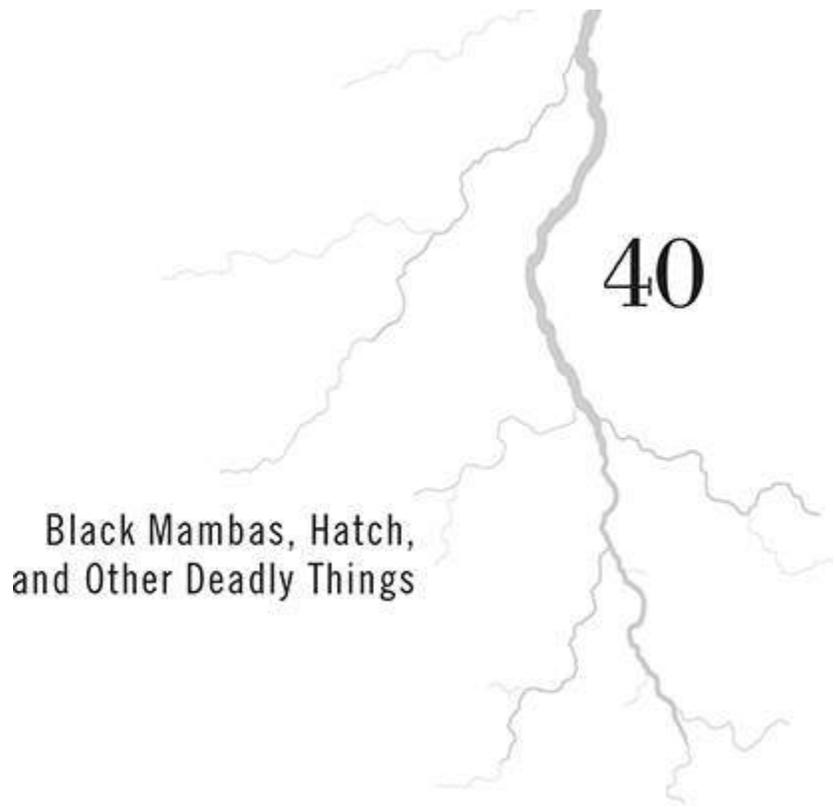
Scott closed the cockpit door, and within fifteen minutes we were in the air. I think that's the best part of a private jet. There's not a lot of sitting around. And you don't have to bring your seat up for takeoff.

Once the plane had settled on a cruising altitude, Gervaso stood up in the aisle at the front of the plane. He steadied himself by holding on to the seats on each side.

"Listen up, all. The flight to Sydney is almost nine hours, so you've got some time to relax. You all look pretty tired, so I suggest that you rest now and we'll talk a few hours before we land. There are some important things we need to go over."

"Sounds good to me," Taylor said softly. "At least the resting part."

We reclined our seats, and she laid her head against me to sleep. We were headed to the monster's lair.



We ended up taking the long way to Sydney, Australia. Usually pilots look for the shortest route between two dots, but in this case that would have basically taken us through a hurricane.

An hour into the flight our pilots informed us that there was a category-five tropical cyclone (which Ostin explained meant there were winds of above one hundred thirty miles per hour) in the area of the Marshall Islands, which were about a thousand miles from Tuvalu and close enough to Sydney that all air traffic had been delayed or rerouted.

We ended up flying from Taipei to Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste—a country I'd never even heard of. Ostin, of course, had not only heard of the country but knew more about it than any normal non-Timorese wanted to know.

He informed us that Timor had been a Portuguese colony since 1520 except when, during World War II, the nation was invaded and

conquered by the Japanese, but Timor was returned to Portugal after the war. Thirty years later it declared its independence from Portugal. Nine days after that it was attacked and conquered by Indonesia, which made it part of their country. Kind of like Tuvalu, which was open to attack from the Elgen after they declared their independence from England. Maybe sometimes it's better to just live with the devil you know.

We didn't do anything in Dili. We didn't even get off the plane. It was raining hard, and we waited on the runway while the ground crews refueled our jet, and then we took off again.

From Dili we flew south over Darwin, Australia, then overland to the Australian east coast and Sydney. Once we were over Australia, Ostin began vomiting facts about the country.

"Did you know that Australia was England's penal colony? It's basically where they dumped all the people they didn't want. That's why modern Australians call people from England 'POME.'"

"What's a 'POME'?" Jack asked.

"It's something that rhymes," Tessa said.

"Not 'po-em,'" Ostin said. "*POME*. It stands for 'Prisoner of Mother England.'" Ostin continued without taking a breath. "There are more than one million wild camels in the Australian outback. And even Saudi Arabia imports camels from Australia."

"That's not true," Tanner said.

"Completely true," Ostin replied. "Before humans arrived, there were nine-foot-tall kangaroos."

"Now he's just making things up," Tessa said.

"Australians have three times more sheep than people. And wombat poop is the shape of a cube."

"What's a wombat?" Abigail asked.

"Something that poops cubes," Jack said.

"A wombat is a plant-eating marsupial that looks like a badger with shorter legs."

"Is it dangerous?" Tessa asked.

"Does it sound dangerous?" Zeus said.

"No."

Ostin nodded. "They have been known to charge humans and bowl them over."

"Oh, that sounds scary," Tessa said, rolling her eyes. "Getting run over by a short-legged, cube-pooing badger."

"Yeah? Well, there are plenty of things in Australia to be really scared of," Ostin said defensively. "Australia is famous for having a lot of things that can kill you. It has more species of venomous snakes than any other country, including one of the most venomous of all land snakes, the inland taipan. One bite has enough venom to kill a hundred people."

"How do they know it can kill one hundred people?" Tessa asked.

Tanner joined in. "Is that, like, exactly one hundred? Because maybe it's really like ninety-seven people. Or what if it's a hundred huge people versus one hundred little people? The whole 'exactly one hundred people' thing sounds suspicious."

"Didn't we already have a snake conversation in Peru?" Taylor asked me.

"Yes," I said. "But this is a new country."

"Is the taipan as dangerous as the black mamba?" Nichelle asked.

"Yes."

"But it's not as cool."

Ostin's brow furrowed. "Why do you say that?"

"Who doesn't like to say 'black . . . mammmmbaaaa'?"

Everyone laughed except for Ostin, who was trying to analyze her point. He eventually gave up and continued. "Just so you know, the black mamba isn't necessarily black. The inside of its mouth is."

"Good, that way I'll know it's dangerous after it bites me," Tanner said.

"What is the most poisonous snake in the world?" Tessa asked.

"Snakes aren't poisonous; they're venomous. Poison is something you eat."

"I wouldn't eat it," Tessa said.

"If you eat poison, you die," Jack said.

"I know," Ostin said.

Jack pressed his point. "But you just said poison is something you eat."

“It is.”

“But no one *would* eat it,” Tessa said. “That’s the point.”

“Poison is something you eat,” Ostin said. “Venom is something you inject.”

“Again,” Tessa said. “I wouldn’t inject it.”

“You’re talking in circles,” Zeus said.

“What is the most *venomous* snake in the world?” Jack asked.

“The Belcher’s sea snake is number one. But it’s not the most dangerous snake in the world.”

“What does that mean?”

“Only about twenty-five percent of Belchers carry venom, and those that do don’t really like to bite. But if it does, and it’s venomous, you’re toast. One bite can kill a thousand people.”

“That doesn’t make it more dangerous,” Zeus said. “What does it matter if it can kill a thousand people or one? Either way you’re dead.”

“He’s got a point,” Nichelle said.

“I never said it was more dangerous. You asked which snake was most venomous.”

“He’s got a point too,” Nichelle said.

“The *point* is,” Zeus continued, “it doesn’t matter if the entire universe implodes on itself or you swallow a grenade, either way you’re dead.”

“Who would swallow a grenade?” Tessa asked.

“A grenade would never fit down your throat,” Nichelle said.

Tessa nodded. “It wouldn’t even fit into your mouth.”

“That’s not the point,” Zeus said.

“You just said it was your point,” Nichelle said.

Zeus groaned. “I’m leaving this conversation.”

“It might fit into Ostin’s mouth,” Tessa said. “It’s pretty big.”

“Thank you,” Ostin said, though I’m not sure why. “Back to the snakes.”

“Oh, thank you,” Taylor said. “I was afraid you’d forgotten.”

“There’s the brown snake, which is known for its bad temper and aggressive nature, which makes it very dangerous. The mulga snake,

which puts out ten times the amount of venom in one bite as the tiger snake, the red-bellied black snake . . .”

“Which isn’t really black, only its toes are,” Tanner mocked.

“Snakes don’t have toes,” Ostin said. “That would make it a lizard.”

“He’s so literal,” Tessa said.

“It’s one of his more endearing qualities,” McKenna said.

“. . . There’s the southern death adder, which is dangerous because it likes to camouflage itself, so it gets stepped on a lot and the venom acts so fast that half the victims die before they can get antivenin. . . .”

“And it has ‘death’ in its name, which makes it super-scary,” Tessa added.

“And then there are spiders.”

“Of course there are,” Taylor said.

“Can we please stop now?” Abigail said. “I have arachnophobia. I’m not kidding.”

“I love that word,” Ostin said, ignoring Abigail’s request. “My favorite is the Sydney funnel-web spider, which is one of the world’s most dangerous spiders. Humans are especially susceptible to its venom.”

Tanner asked Taylor, “Why would anyone have a favorite spider?”

“I’ll just stick to the ocean,” Tessa said.

“You’re not safe in the ocean,” Ostin said. “Especially not in *this* ocean. It’s filled with all kinds of killers.”

“Like the great white shark,” Jack said.

“Yes, but there’s worse,” Ostin said. “Much worse.”

“What’s worse than a great white?”

“There’s the blue-ringed octopus, with one of the most toxic venoms on the planet. If it bites you, it causes paralysis within minutes, stopping your heart and lungs.”

“I can do that in seconds,” Cassy said.

“You bite people and cause paralysis?” Zeus asked.

Cassy laughed. “Sometimes.”

Ostin continued. “There’s the cone snail. One sting can kill fifteen healthy adults within hours.”

“But one sting doesn’t kill fifteen anything, because one sting is for one person and you only die once,” Zeus protested.

“Don’t start that again,” Taylor said. “It’s a slippery slope.”

“There’s a fish called the stonefish. Its sting is so excruciating that people die just from the pain. When it comes to killers, most people think of the great white shark as the deadliest creature of the sea, but the box jellyfish has killed more people than all sharks, stonefish, and crocodiles combined. And it’s almost invisible.”

“That is so comforting,” Taylor said. “The invisible killer.”

“Like carbon monoxide,” Jack said.

Ostin continued. “Even the gentle male platypus has enough venom to kill a dog.”

Taylor groaned. “That does it. I’m not getting off the plane.”

“Is there anything venomous in Tuvalu?”

Three of us said at the exact same time, “Hatch.”

* * *

A few minutes later Tessa said, “I know something about Australia. The name ‘Kylie’ came from the name of an aboriginal hunting stick similar to the boomerang.”

“So Kylie just keeps coming back,” Zeus said.

“All I know about Australia,” McKenna said, “is that they have koala bears, a whole lot of kangaroos, and that famous place where they hold concerts.”

“That would be the Sydney Opera House,” Ostin said. “Did you know that if all the sails of the Sydney Opera House roof were combined, they would create a perfect sphere?”

“A spear?” Jack said.

“A *sphere*. You know, a ball. The architect was peeling an orange when he came up with the idea.”

“A ball or an orange?” Jack asked.

“They’re both spheres,” Ostin said.

“Then why didn’t you just say an orange to begin with?”

“Yeah,” Zeus said. “You can’t peel a ball.”

“I peeled a golf ball once,” Tanner said. “It had like a million elastics inside. It moved like it was alive.”

“This is making me hungry for oranges,” Tessa said.

“We should eat more *bananas*,” Taylor said. “I’ve been slacking off.”

“No one ever designed anything to look like a banana,” Jack said.

Tessa shook her head. “Can you blame them?”

Ostin sighed. “Also, some shopping malls play classical music in their parking lots at night to scare off teenagers.”

“That would scare me,” Nichelle said. “More than a wombat.”

“Much more than a wombat,” Tessa agreed.

* * *

In spite of everyone pretty much dissing Ostin (who now looked as if he might lose his mind), I was glad for the conversation. Somehow it made me feel hopeful. I suppose in times of danger it is helpful to cling to mundane things. Like holding on to a life raft in rapids.

While everyone was talking, I looked over at Welch. He was sitting alone, quietly watching us. He had a grim look on his face. I wondered what was going on in his mind. The reality of him being with us was a strange one for all of us, but it had to be especially strange for him. It was hard to believe that this was the same man who had hunted us in our childhood. He didn’t look so frightening now. In fact, other than his size, he looked just like any other man you might walk by and not notice.

I remember hearing something from the Bible that said, “Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms?” This was the man who made *us* tremble, who was calling the shots against us in Peru and Taiwan. Now he was sitting with all of us, quietly listening.

I wondered what that felt like, to be cast out from your tribe and to seek refuge among your former enemies. Among the Elgen, Welch was a traitor. I suppose the real question is, you can take the man out of the evil, but can you take the evil out of the man?

Still, the fact that he was going with us to Tuvalu spoke volumes about him. I wasn’t sure what Hatch would do with us, but it was a guaranteed death sentence for Welch. Back in Dili, Jack had asked me if I thought we could trust him.

“What are the odds of Hatch forgiving him?” I asked.

“Zero,” Jack replied. “Less than zero. Negative zero.”
“That’s why we can trust him.”

* * *

“I’m going to talk to Zeus,” I said. Taylor scooted back so I could get around her, and I walked down the aisle. Tessa was asleep next to him, listening to music with earbuds. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, bro.”

“You don’t need to answer if you don’t want.”

“Ask away.”

“What is it between you and Welch? It feels like there’s bad blood.”

Zeus’s eyes narrowed as he glanced toward Welch. “Yeah, there’s bad blood. A freaking river of it.”

“What happened?”

“You mean other than he was the one who kidnapped me and killed my family?”

“No, that’s enough reason to hold a grudge.”

“There’s more. We were on the outs long before you showed up. Remember when the Elgen found us in the safe house in Idaho, before we went to Peru? There was that one guard who hated me because I shocked him in the shower and he hurt his back?”

That time seemed like a lifetime ago. “Yeah. The one who was torturing you.”

“That’s the dude. He was Welch’s college buddy. Ever since he hurt his back, Welch treated me like trash. Most of the time he called me ‘stinky’ or ‘the pungent one’ in front of the other Glows. If it wasn’t for Hatch, I’m sure he would have done worse.”

“I can see why you hate him,” I said softly. “Anyone would. But right now, we can’t afford any division between us. Can you forgive him?”

“No.”

“Can you work with him?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I can put it aside. For now.”

“Then do that. There will be time after to put things right.”

“What if there’s not?”

I looked at him for a moment, then said, “Then it won’t matter, will it?”

He thought about that, then grinned. “You’re right.”

We bumped fists, and I went back to my seat.

Taylor waited until I had settled in before asking, “How’d it go?”

“Not good,” I said. “But we’ll survive.”

A few minutes later our pilot, Scott, came out of the cockpit. He crouched down next to Gervaso.

“So if he’s out here, who’s flying the plane?” Nichelle asked.

“His copilot’s still in front,” Zeus said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ostin said. “The plane can fly itself. It’s called autopilot. It’s like autocorrect.”

“I hope it’s not like autocorrect,” Jack said. “I sent a text to a girl that said I wanted to kiss her. Her father ended up on my doorstep with the police. The autocorrect had changed my text to I wanted to kill her.”

Tanner laughed. “That’s epic, dude.”

“Her dad didn’t think so.”

“Excuse me,” Gervaso said, standing up near the front. “May I have your attention?”

We all stopped talking and looked at him.

“We are currently a little more than two hours from Sydney. After we land, we’ll be going to a hotel where we can rest and wait out this storm before we fly to Fiji. Are there any questions?”

“How long will we be in Sydney?” McKenna asked.

“The short answer is, we don’t know. The storm has interrupted our timeline. Probably at least a few days. If the boats aren’t sailing, it’s better we wait in Australia. Fiji’s a small country with many Elgen informants.

“The longer answer is, we’ve got eight days until the Elgen kill the first of their youths. So weather or not, we’re going.”

McKenna raised her hand. “Once we get to Sydney, can we go out, or do we have to wait in the hotel?”

“You should be okay to go out. Just be smart about it and don’t go out alone. Buddy system.” He looked around. “Any other questions?”

Ostin asked, “Why didn’t we fly directly to Auckland, New Zealand? It’s a fifty percent shorter flight to Fiji.”

“I’ll answer that,” Scott said. “Besides the weather, three months ago, the Elgen started running a direct charter from Tuvalu to Auckland, which means there are now full-time Elgen guards and employees at the Auckland Airport. Even though it is New Zealand’s largest airport, it’s still a single runway, which means—”

Ostin interrupted, probably trying to save face after being publicly schooled. “. . . The odds of encountering Elgen is highly probable and therefore unacceptable. Smart move.”

“I’m glad you agree,” Scott said, smiling slightly. He gave us a short wave. “I’ll see you on the ground.”

A moment later Cassy squatted down in the aisle next to Taylor and me. “Hi, Michael. Taylor.”

“Hey,” I said.

Taylor just kind of nodded.

Cassy asked, “Is now a good time to talk?”

“Sure,” I said.

“You can take my seat,” Taylor said, abruptly standing.

“You don’t need to leave,” Cassy said.

“No,” Taylor said. “I do. I need to stretch my legs.”

I watched her as she walked toward the back of the plane.

Cassy sat down next to me. “I’m sorry, is there a problem?”

“No. She’s just a little . . .”

When I didn’t finish, Cassy said, “Jealous?”

I nodded. “Yeah. A little.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. We’ve just had a rough go of it lately.” I reclined my seat back a few inches. “So what did you want to talk about?”

“I’ve been waiting to meet you for so long that I feel like I should get to know you better.”

“You’ve been waiting to meet me?”

“For a long time. I’ve known about you for more than five years. We knew you were out there somewhere before you were found by the Elgen. We were looking for you too. Unfortunately, the Elgen found you first.”

“That was unfortunate,” I said.

“I’m sorry. We did our best. I’ve heard about Cell 25.”

I hurried to change the subject. “So what did you want to ask me?”

“All right,” she said, settling into the seat. “First question. You were the last to find out that there were other electricians. What was it like to grow up thinking there was no one else in the world like you?”

I pondered her question. “Mostly it was lonely. Partially because my mother and I were always hiding and moving. And partially because I always felt like I was different from everyone else and I was afraid of what they would think if they knew the truth. It wasn’t until just recently that I learned that almost everyone feels that way. You don’t have to be an electric mutant to feel like you’re different.”

“Or have Tourette’s,” she said.

“Or have Tourette’s,” I repeated.

“I was told that you keep getting more electric. Is that true?”

I put my hands out in front of me with the fingers about three inches apart. Electricity began arcing between my hands. “I’m not even pulsing. A few weeks ago, I couldn’t do that.”

“I’ve also heard that you can absorb other powers.”

“Not always,” I said. “It’s happened, though.”

“Can you absorb mine?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you try?”

I thought about it. “No. I can’t control it. I’m not sure what will happen with it.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I really want to see if you can.”

When I didn’t say anything, she said, “Please.”

I breathed out slowly. “All right. I’ll try. No guarantees it will work.” I put my hand on her arm. “Let’s see.”

I could feel her, as if she was dissolving into me. Then suddenly she froze. Completely. Her eyes didn’t blink or move, she wasn’t breathing. “Cassy?”

She couldn’t speak.

“Cassy!” I took my hand off, and she fell sideways, completely still. She looked dead.

“Gervaso!” I shouted.

Gervaso jumped up. "What's wrong?"

"Cassy passed out or something."

He grabbed Cassy by the shoulders and lifted her. "Recline her seat all the way."

I pressed her seat button, and he laid her back.

"She's not breathing," Gervaso said. "What happened?"

"She wanted to see if I could freeze her."

"Her heart stopped!" Ian shouted from the front.

Gervaso began giving her CPR.

"It's not working," Ian said. "Her blood's not flowing to her brain."

Gervaso pushed harder.

"Still nothing," Ian said. "We're losing her."

"Let me shock her," I said.

"Hurry," Gervaso said, leaning back. I put my hands on Cassy's chest and pulsed. Her whole body jumped. Then she began trembling and gasping for air.

"She's back," Ian said.

I breathed out in relief. "I'm so sorry."

"It was an accident," Gervaso said. "Abi, come help us."

"Here," Abigail said.

She put her hand on Cassy's head, and Cassy's body immediately began to relax. After a few seconds Cassy opened her eyes and groaned. Everyone was quiet. She looked up at Abi and me.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"What happened?"

"I froze you. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Abigail rubbed Cassy's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Thank you. You have a beautiful gift."

"Thank you."

"How does she look, Ian?" Gervaso asked.

"Heart, lungs, and blood flow look normal."

Gervaso still looked concerned. "How do you feel?"

"I think I'm okay. Just a headache."

He felt her forehead, then said, "All right. Just rest. We'll see how you are after we land." He got up and went back to his seat.

“I really am sorry,” I said. “I wasn’t trying to kill you. I shouldn’t have done that.”

It took a moment for her to answer. “It’s not your fault. I made you do it.”

“That’s the problem with taking someone’s power. They’ve been using their powers most of their lives. For me it’s like riding a bike for the first time.”

A little while later Taylor came up the aisle and knelt down next to Cassy. She put her hand on her arm. “Are you okay?”

“I think so. I’m sorry I’ve taken your seat. I don’t think I can walk just yet.”

“No hurry,” Taylor said softly. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Thank you.”

Taylor glanced at me, then went to the back of the plane. After a moment Cassy said, “That was nice of her.”

“She’s a good person,” I said.

“I know.” She closed her eyes again. “I’ve wondered what it felt like to be on the other side of my power. It’s not so great.”

“You do a better job of not hurting people,” I said.

“I’ll have to remember to go easy.”

“I think you just went through more than most.”

She said softly, “I know. I think I died.”

“What?”

“My heart stopped, right?”

I looked at her quizzically. “Yes, but you were unconscious. How did you know that?”

“My body was unconscious, but I wasn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“I left my body. I was, like, floating above my body and I could see what everyone was doing. You reclined my seat and Gervaso gave me CPR. Ian shouted from the front that my heart was stopped and that blood wasn’t getting to my brain. Then you shocked me.”

I looked at her in amazement. “That’s exactly what happened.”

“I could see everything. Ostin was working on a crossword puzzle. He was writing *P-R-O-B-O-S*-something.”

I looked back over my seat. "Ostin."

"Yeah?"

"Are you doing a crossword puzzle?"

"I was. Why?"

"Did you write . . ." I looked at Cassy. "What was that?"

"Probos . . .," she said, struggling with the word.

"Proboscis," Ostin said. "Eleven across, a nine-letter word for a mammal's long nose or snout. That's when I stopped to see how you were. How did you know that?"

"Lucky guess," she said, leaving Ostin baffled. She looked back at me. "The really weird thing, I was able to go outside the plane and travel as fast as it was. Even faster. I went to the front of the plane and watched the pilots. The younger one is asleep. The other was eating a Hershey's chocolate bar." Her brow fell. "Do you think I was dead?"

"I've heard that when you die, you're supposed to see a light."

"I didn't see it," she said. "But maybe it's because I wasn't supposed to die."

"Maybe," I said. "I'm glad it wasn't your time."

"That's a good omen, right? About our mission?"

I thought about it. "Yeah, I think so."

Cassy took in a deep breath. "I still don't feel very good. I think I'll rest a little." She lay back and closed her eyes. Within a few minutes she was asleep. I picked up a *Popular Science* magazine and read.

About a half hour later she woke, rubbing her eyes with her hand.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, setting down my magazine.

"Better."

"I wanted to ask you something," I said.

"Go ahead."

"What's it like, living with the voice?"

"I've been treated really well. I guess I've always considered myself lucky."

"In what way?"

"You know, the Elgen could have found me first. I might have been fighting against you right now instead of with you."

"What do you do with the voice?"

"I'm mostly his bodyguard. This mission is one of the few times I've left him."

"He made you come?"

"No. I volunteered."

"Really? You volunteered for this? Didn't you know how dangerous it was?"

She nodded. "I knew."

"Then why would you volunteer?"

"Why did you?"

I shrugged. "Someone had to do it."

"Exactly." A moment later she added, "And maybe I was bored."

"If you were bored, you could have found something safer to do than attacking the Elgen. Like skydiving without a parachute."

She laughed. "I think there was also some guilt involved."

"Who made you feel guilty?"

"You. Not that I'm blaming you. It's just, you and your friends have been out here fighting this whole time while I'm living safe and in luxury. When I was little, the voice read a quote to me. It was something like, 'You should be ashamed to die without winning some victory for humanity.'"

I looked at her with surprise. "I know that quote. I think it was important to my father."

She slightly nodded. "Then you understand why I needed to prove myself."

"Proving yourself could cost you your life. Is it worth it?"

She smiled a half smile. "Ask me that *after* I die."

I grinned.

"I think the real question is, is an unproven life worth living?"

As I thought about the question, she touched my arm. "I think I should give Taylor her seat back." She started to stand up.

"Cassy. Thank you."

"For what?"

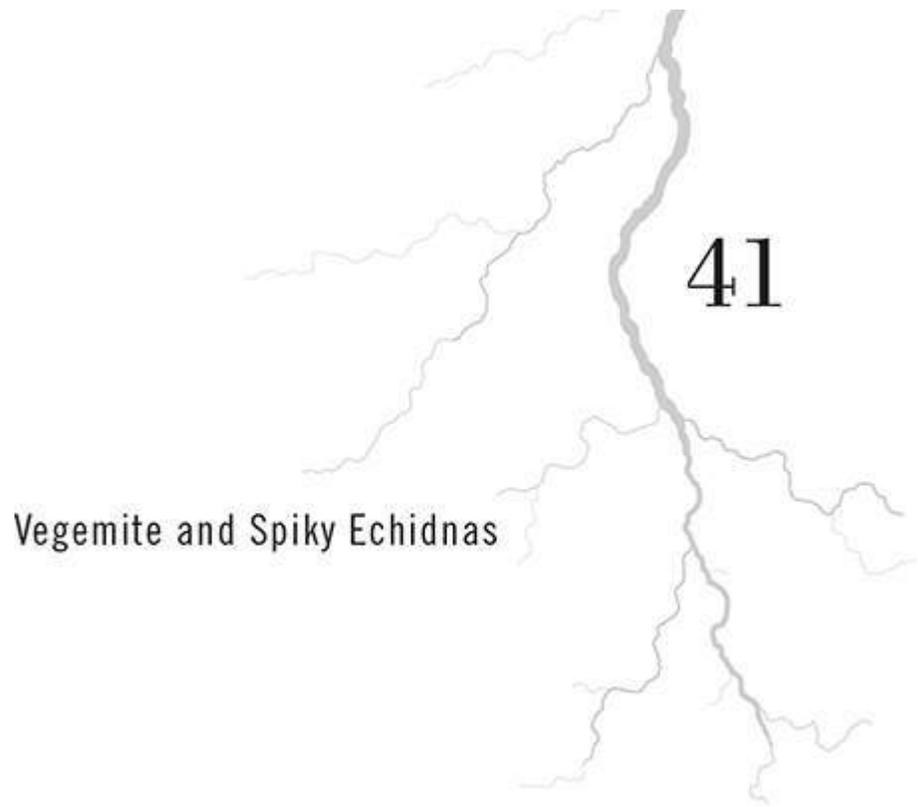
"For being courageous."

She smiled. "I had good examples." She walked slowly back to her seat, stopping to thank Taylor on the way.

Taylor came back over and sat by me. “She’s really nice. I feel like such a jerk.”

“I’m the one who almost killed her.”

We landed in Sydney late in the afternoon, though the rain was torrential and the skies were so overcast that it almost looked like night. The storm was still raging a few hundred miles northeast of us, so there wasn’t much we could do but wait it out and hope the storm died before the Glows did.



Sydney, Australia

I should have felt safer in Australia than Taiwan. Much safer. As far as we knew, the Elgen had no presence in the country, and, except for the accent, we pretty much looked and sounded like everyone else.

But I didn't feel safer. Maybe it had nothing to do with Australia. Maybe it was just because the clock was ticking down on our mission and we were closer to Tuvalu than we'd ever been.

Still, I'd noticed that in spite of the stress, I wasn't ticking as much as usual. Instead of blinking or gulping, I was sparking more. I wondered if it was just because I was becoming more electric or if my Tourette's was taking a different form.

The weather might have had something to do with my anxiety as well. I think I might have a bit of SAD—seasonal affective disorder—which is just an Ostin way of saying I get blue when the skies aren't blue. And the skies were definitely not blue. I don't think that I'd ever seen it rain so hard in my life. Not in Idaho, at least. The rain was practically horizontal.

It was a challenge getting Zeus off the plane. First, we couldn't land because the runways were backed up because of lightning striking the tarmac. Then there was no hangar for the plane—so even if we had wanted to make a run for the terminal, Zeus still had to wait for a break in the weather, which, unfortunately, didn't come until about two hours later. Even then he had to wear a rain poncho and carry an umbrella. After more than twelve hours on the plane, we were past exhausted.

* * *

We stayed at a four-star hotel on the Sydney Cove across from the famous Sydney Opera House, which made McKenna really happy. It was one of her goals to see the opera house, and now she could see it from her hotel room.

I didn't care much about the scenery. I just couldn't wait to lie down in a real bed. After we got into our room, Ostin said, "So, Michael, going through this storm got me thinking."

"Thinking or talking?"

He ignored my question. "I've been thinking about what would happen to you if you were struck by lightning."

If someone else had said that, I would have thought they were crazy, but it was Ostin and that's just the way his mind worked. He'd think about the strangest scenarios and try to figure them out, which is why he came in handy in weird places like Elgen Starxource plants and Peruvian prison cells.

"Probably the same thing that would happen to anyone else," I said.

"I'm not so sure about that," he said. "Did you know that less than ten percent of ordinary people struck by lightning die? But you're not ordinary. You might be able to survive a direct strike."

“I’d rather not find out,” I said, closing my eyes and hoping he’d do the same with his mouth.

“I’m not saying you should walk out into a storm with a lightning rod or anything, but it would be interesting to find out. Of course there’s the heat problem. Did you know that the air around a lightning strike is superheated to more than thirty-three thousand degrees Celsius? That’s more than four times hotter than the surface of the sun. That makes McKenna seem like a heating pad. I mean, not literally, but at least her power.” He sat down on the near side of his bed. “Just imagine if you were able to absorb that much electricity like you did in the rat bowl. You would be a god.”

“I’m not a god.”

“With that much electricity people would think you were. People have always associated lightning with gods. That’s why the most powerful Greek god was Zeus, the god of lightning. And there was Thor in Norse mythology, Ukko in Finland, Tlaloc the Aztec god, and Indra the Hindu god, all gods of lightning. I could go on.”

“Please don’t.”

“I’m just saying, with that much electricity, you could conquer the world.”

“For now I’d be happy to conquer this pillow.”

Ostin lay back. “It would be cool. Michael the god.”

It’s the last thing I heard before falling asleep.

* * *

I woke to thunder the next morning. *More rain*, I thought. I walked to the window and opened the blinds. In spite of the thunder, the weather had improved some. There were dark clouds, but it was only lightly sprinkling. Twelve stories below I could see the wet street and harbor buzzing with traffic.

Ostin was still asleep, so I quietly took a shower and got dressed. As I was putting on my shoes, our room phone rang. It was Taylor.

“What are you guys doing today?” she asked.

“We haven’t made any plans yet. Ostin’s still asleep.”

“Is that him snoring?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. You weren’t kidding. I thought that was thunder.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So, the concierge told us about a really cool wildlife refuge not too far from here. They have koalas and kangaroos.”

“I’m in. Did you ask Gervaso if we could go?”

“He said that the pilots are still waiting on the weather, so we can do whatever we want.”

“Where are you now?”

“We’re just about to get breakfast. We’re in the dining room in the lobby. Want to join us?”

“Yeah. I’ll wake Ostin. See you in a minute.”

I woke Ostin and told him that I’d meet him in the first-floor restaurant.

“Wait,” he said. “I’ll come with you.” He pulled on his clothes from the day before, then, without even looking in the mirror, walked out with me.

As we walked to the elevator, I said, “Dude, your hair looks like a tsunami.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you should have looked in the mirror before we left.”

* * *

We found the girls sitting at a table near the back of the restaurant. I was happy to see Cassy sitting next to Taylor. On the other side of McKenna was Tessa. They were already eating.

“Good morning,” Taylor said.

“Good morning.” I kissed Taylor, then sat down next to her. “They already brought your food out?”

“It’s a buffet,” she said. “You get it yourself.”

“Love the concept,” Ostin said, already on his way to the food.

I followed him over to the buffet. The food looked great. Best of all, they had Belgian waffles. When we got back to the table, Ostin began spreading a dark brown paste on his waffle.

“What’s that gross-looking stuff you’re putting on your waffle?” Tessa asked.

“Vegemite.”

“That tells me nothing,” she said.

“It’s similar to the British Marmite.”

“Again, nothing.”

Ostin took a bite of the waffle, then said, with his mouth full, “It’s a food paste made from leftover brewer’s yeast extract.”

“I think I just threw up in my mouth,” McKenna said.

“I’d rather eat my shoe,” Tessa said.

“It looks like something from the bottom of your shoe,” Cassy said.

“I’ll try some,” I said, feeling brave. I put just a little on my English muffin, but I still almost gagged. “Why would you eat that?”

Ostin shrugged. “I don’t know. Why do people eat oysters?”

“A dare?”

I noticed Welch sitting on the other side of the restaurant eating alone. After a few minutes I got up and walked over to him. He looked up as I approached.

“Hi,” I said.

He looked up, then motioned to the chair across from him. “Have a seat. Coffee?”

“No, thanks,” I said, sitting.

He took a sip. “How are you feeling about things?”

“I have to admit, it’s weird having you here.”

“I was thinking the same thing. What Hatch would give to be in my shoes right now.”

“If Hatch were here, I’d electrocute him.”

“So would I. That is, if I could.” He took a bite of a croissant and chased it with more coffee. He looked at me, then said, “I’m worried for you.”

“I’m worried for all of us,” I said.

“Yes, appropriately. But I’m especially worried for you. In Hatch’s mind you have become his prime nemesis. He believes that you’re the final obstacle between him and his plans. He doesn’t just want you dead; he wants you to pay for the humiliation you’ve caused him and the Elgen.”

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

"I wouldn't, if I were you. It might slow you down. The only way you'll ever be safe is to kill him. Keep *that* in mind."

He went back to his meal as if I wasn't there.

Nice chat, I thought. I got up and rejoined the others.

* * *

After everyone was done eating (except Ostin, who was technically never done eating at an all-you-can-eat buffet), we walked out to the front of the hotel to get taxis to the wildlife refuge. There were nine of us, as Abigail, Ian, and Nichelle had joined us, so we took two cars.

"What's the place called?" Ostin asked.

"Featherdale," McKenna said. "It sounds cool." She grabbed his arm. "I get to see a koala!"

Ostin was smiling, not because of the koala but because McKenna was holding his arm.

"Where's Zeus?" I asked Tessa.

Tessa pointed to the sky. "He's staying in. He and Jack are playing video games."

"And Tanner?"

She shrugged. "Who knows?"

* * *

Featherdale Wildlife Park was forty minutes from the hotel and was worth the ride. The park was cool and the crowds were light, probably because of the rain. Australia not only has the most dangerous animals; it has some of the strangest ones. I mean, a platypus? It's like a failed cloning experiment.

At McKenna's insistence, our first stop was the koala sanctuary, where Taylor and McKenna got to hold a koala. Then we went to the crocodile feeding, followed by a visit to the kangaroos, wallabies, potoroos, and pademelons. I had never heard of the last two animals, but they were also marsupials and basically looked like rabbit- or hamster-size kangaroos.

There was also an animal called a quokka, which looked like a rat but walked like a kangaroo. The animal came from the island of Rottnest near Perth, which was so named because a Dutch explorer thought the animals were rats and called the island Rattennest—Dutch for “Rat’s Nest”—which was later changed to Rottnest.

Next we went to the echidnas exhibit. I had never heard of them either, but they were pretty awesome. They looked like tiny anteaters with big snouts and spiky quills. They walked funny, sticking their legs straight out like alligators.

“Echidnas and platypuses are the only surviving mammals that still lay eggs,” Ostin said. “Echidna babies are called puggles.”

“I thought a puggle was a mix between a pug and a beagle,” Taylor said.

“That’s just a designer dog thing,” Ostin said. “Echidna puggles came first.”

Peculiarly, even though there were at least fifty people at the echidnas exhibit, the animals pretty much ignored everyone but us. At one time I had six of the animals trying to crawl on me.

“Look,” Taylor said. “They like us.”

“That makes sense,” Ostin said. “Echidnas are monotremes, the only land mammals that have evolved electroreception. Platypuses and echidnas can see electric signals. You’re drawing them like a moth to light.”

Ostin was most excited about the feeding of the Tasmanian devils. The only thing I knew about the Tasmanian devil was what I saw on the cartoons when I was little, but they truly are vicious little creatures. They not only have the strongest bite for their size of any living mammal, but they can take down animals four times their size. And they eat wombats, cube poop and all.

“I keep seeing this word ‘marsupial,’” Tessa said. “What does it mean?”

“It means they come from Mars,” Ostin said.

Tessa’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“No. There is no life on Mars.”

Taylor and I looked at each other in surprise. “I think Ostin just told a joke,” she said.

* * *

The park was a nice reprieve from the dread I had been carrying around. The only time I felt jolted back to reality was while we were eating lunch at the café and McKenna said, “I want to take a koala home.”

“We’re not going home,” Tessa said.

Everyone went quiet. After a moment Taylor said, “I am.”

* * *

Before going back to the hotel, we took the taxis a little farther to see the Blue Mountains—so called because of a peculiar blue haze in the air around them. Ostin told us that the mountains are covered by eucalyptus forests and the eucalyptus oil in the air causes the bluish-gray hue.

We got back to our hotel around seven. We ate dinner at a nearby Chinese restaurant called Fortune Village, then headed back to the hotel.

“We girls are going window-shopping,” Taylor said.

“Do you want us to go with you?” I asked.

“Only if you really want to shop.”

I thought about it, then said, “I’d rather cut that little thing under my tongue with rusty scissors.”

“Me too,” Ostin said.

“Me three,” Ian said.

Taylor smiled. “I figured. See you back at the hotel.”

* * *

As Ian, Ostin, and I walked back to our rooms, Gervaso stopped us in the hallway.

“How was your day?” he asked. His voice and expression were somber. Something was clearly on his mind.

“It was good,” I said. “We went to the wildlife refuge.”

He slightly nodded. “I just talked to the pilots. The storm in the South Pacific has been downgraded again. We leave for Fiji tomorrow.”

“What time?” Ostin asked.

“Noon. Spread the word.” He turned and walked off.
“Noon it is,” I said.



The next morning, Ostin and I went down to breakfast together. Tanner, Jack, Zeus, Tessa, and Abigail were already there. Everyone looked tired.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Is it?” Tanner replied.

I ignored him.

“How was the park?” Zeus asked.

“Kangaroos and koalas,” I said. “What’s not to like?”

“Did you know kangaroos can box?” Jack said. “I’d like to try boxing one. I hear they’re pretty good.”

“It’s cruel,” Abigail said.

“Boxing *is* cruel,” Jack replied. “That’s the point.”

“I didn’t know it had one,” Abigail said.

“Sounds like everyone’s having grouchy flakes for breakfast,” Ostin said.

“No one’s cheerful on death row,” Tanner said.

“I’m out of here,” I said.

Ostin and I walked over to the buffet tables. I got a stack of pancakes and some link sausage. While I was waiting for the chef to make me an omelet, Taylor walked up behind me.

“What’s up with the cheer squad?” she asked.

“You talked to them, huh? They could use a cheerleader. Know any?”

“Not anymore. McKenna and I saved a table over there. Far away from the table of gloom.”

“I’ll be right over,” I said.

* * *

By the time we finished eating, the rest of our group was in the restaurant, including Gervaso and Welch, who sat alone in a corner and spent more time talking than eating. I couldn’t hear them, but their facial expressions seemed especially tense. When Gervaso stood, we all got up to leave.

Hardly anyone spoke as we took our bags out to the shuttles and drove to the airport. The weather had cleared up, with just a few scattered clouds, not that you could tell. We had brought our own storm cloud. Only McKenna seemed cheerful. I don’t think she had rose-colored glasses; she just preferred being happy. I was grateful for that.

We boarded the plane at a quarter of twelve. Even Scott and Boyd, the pilots, seemed more sullen than usual, taking our luggage from us without the usual greetings. After we were airborne, Gervaso stood up at the front of the plane.

“Let me have your attention. We’ve had a few days of reprieve and anonymity. Those days are gone. From here on out we are on the battleground. My contact in Fiji informs me that the islands are crawling with Elgen, many of whom are not in uniform.

“Fiji is Tuvalu’s front porch, so the Elgen are making a point of knowing who is playing in their yard. They will want to know who you are and what you are doing there. So take no chances and stay

invisible. That means no wandering off. No being alone. Talk to no one. Under no circumstances are you to speak, type, or write the word 'Elgen.' If someone asks you why you are there, you must assume they are informants.

"Our flight is four and a half hours. Tonight at dinner we will be meeting with my friend who will be sailing us into Tuvalu. He's taking a great risk in transporting us, both to his job *and* his life. I do not want him endangered any more than he has to be. His name is J.D. and, as I said back at the ranch, he took a bullet for me. I'd do the same for him. Don't make me." He looked around the cabin. "All right, then. Captain Welch has asked to say a few words."

Welch stood. "It's no surprise to any of you that I consider this a highly risky mission. I did not say *suicide* mission, but I do not suspect that we will all return. This is our Normandy beach. The Elgen do not expect us to make such a bold move. If they did, I would call it off immediately. I agree with Gervaso that it is our best chance to deal the Elgen a fatal blow.

"But make no mistake, this is like walking into a rattlesnake den with a machete. No matter how many snakes you kill, someone is still going to get bit.

"So you know, I will not be captured. For me—perhaps for all of us—being captured is the same as death, only one that Hatch can prolong and enjoy. So the only option for me is to fight to the death. I suggest you come to a similar conclusion. I hope it doesn't come to that." With that, he sat down, leaving us all in a state of despair.

"If that was our pregame inspirational speech," Jack said, "I can wait for halftime."

* * *

The clouds inside the plane were thicker than those outside it. Then, in the midst of it all, Ostin turned encyclopedia on us again.

"Hey, it's time for facts about Fiji. Did you know"—I don't know why he asked that, as we never did—"Fiji has a population of almost a million people and is made up of 332 islands? About one-third of them are inhabited.

“The international date line runs through the Fiji island of Taveuni, so you can be in two days at the same time. Also, there’s a red-and-white flower in Taveuni that blooms nowhere else in the world.”

“If I see it, I’ll pick it and you can wear it in your hair,” I said to Taylor.

“It’s probably protected,” Taylor said.

“Fijians used to be cannibals,” Ostin said. “People used to call the place the Cannibal Isles. The last guy they ate was a missionary named Thomas Baker. Natives said he was doing okay until he touched the chief on his head. That’s a big ‘don’t do’ in Fiji. So they ate him.”

“The lesson I’m taking from this is don’t touch anyone on the head,” Taylor said.

“So you can eat people, but you can’t touch them on the head?” Jack said. “That’s messed up.”

“Crazy messed up,” Tessa said. “So, Michael, they won’t arrest you if you pick that flower; they’ll eat you.”

“They don’t eat people today,” Ostin said. “That was a long time ago. But they still sell cannibal forks.”

“What’s a cannibal fork?”

“I think that’s pretty self-evident,” Tanner said. “It’s a fork for eating people.”

“Can we not talk about eating people?” Abigail said. “It sounds like something Hatch would do.”

“Don’t give him ideas,” Nichelle said.

“Hatch doesn’t need help coming up with evil ideas,” Tanner said. “He’s a freaking evil idea factory.”

Ostin continued. “The cannibal fork, or as it’s called in Fijian, the *ai cula ni bokola*, was used during ritual feasts by those considered by the tribe too holy to touch food, such as their chiefs and priests.

“One of the Fijian tribal chief’s most important ceremonies was the eating of their tribe’s enemy. Since the chief couldn’t use their hands for this important ritual, they came up with a special fork. Forks became a way to show the chief’s power. The fancier the fork, the more important the owner.”

“That’s some freaky kind of status symbol,” Tessa said.

“I’d like to see them try to eat me,” Zeus said. “I’d light them up like a Christmas tree.”

“They wouldn’t eat you,” I said. “They’d worship you. You’d be the Fijian god of lightning.”

“Were the people of Tuvalu cannibals?”

Tanner said, “We should ask Welch.”

“I know things about Tuvalu,” Ostin said.

“Of course you do,” Tanner said. “We should ask Welch.”

Ostin ignored the slight and continued. “Did you know that Robert Louis Stevenson visited Niutao? That’s the island we’re going to. The one Hatch named Hades.”

“Who’s Robert Lewison?” Tessa asked.

Ostin raised one eyebrow. “Oh, please. Really? What did they teach you at the academy?”

“How to take over the world. Mostly.”

“I’m down with that,” Jack said.

“. . . Stevenson is only one of the greatest writers of all times. Ever heard of *Treasure Island*? Or Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? *Treasure Island* alone has more than seventy-five movies, television shows, and stage productions.”

“So what was he doing in Tuvalu?”

“He was visiting Australia when he decided to book a trading steamer called the *Janet Nicoll*. They anchored off Niutao for a while to take on copra.”

“Who’s Copra?” Zeus asked.

“I know this one,” Tessa said. “He’s that movie director. He did that one Christmas movie where that guy rips off a bank, then meets an angel—”

“It’s called *It’s a Wonderful Life*,” Taylor said. “And he didn’t rip off the bank. The stupid old guy lost the money, and it was stolen by the evil old dude in the wheelchair.”

“Potter,” McKenna said.

“Yeah, that one,” Tessa said. “Except he wasn’t a potter; he was a banker.”

“His name was Potter,” McKenna said.

“Oh, yeah.”

Ostin just looked at them like they'd lost their minds. "Copra is dried coconut meat. It's where they get coconut oil."

"Like any normal human should know that," Taylor said.

"I'm sticking with the movie director," Tessa said.

For a moment Ostin was speechless. "Anyway, while they were picking up copra, Stevenson's wife, Fanny, wrote about it. She published her story under the title *The Cruise of the Janet Nichol*."

"I like that," Taylor said. "The *Janet Nichol*. Why do they name ships after women?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Why do they name hurricanes after women?"

"I know," Ostin said. "It's because . . ."

McKenna and Taylor both looked at him.

"Uh . . . because they're powerful."

I grinned at him. "Good save, man. Good save."

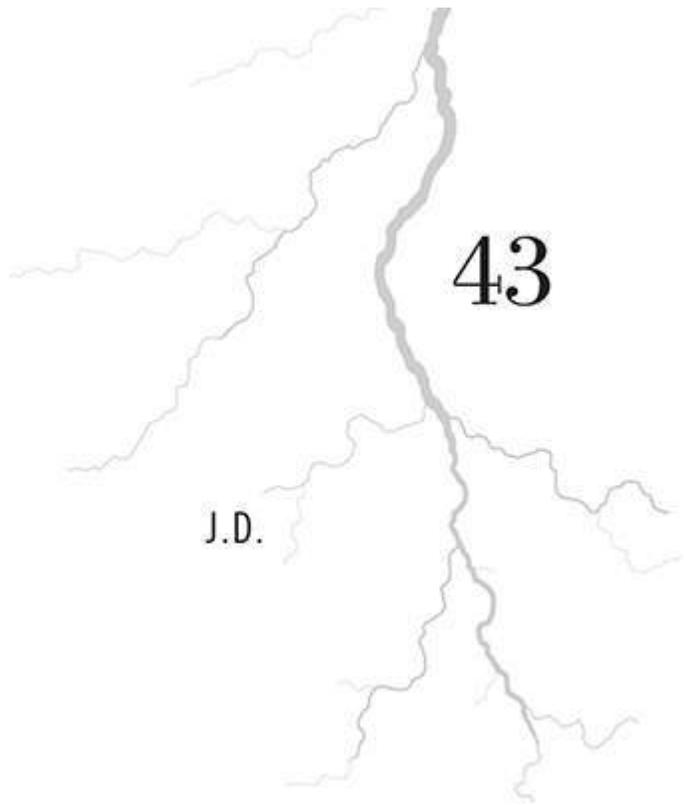
"He's getting good at this," Taylor said.

"Stevenson said something I think is relevant to our situation," Ostin said. "'Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a poor hand well.'"

"We've got the poor hand part right," Tanner said.

Ostin looked at him with an uncharacteristic dark glare. "He also said, 'The world has no room for cowards.'"

Tanner said nothing.



Our plane landed on the Fiji island of Viti Levu, the largest island in the Republic of Fiji and the location of the nation's capital city of Suva.

As we got off the plane, the air was hot and especially humid, even more than in Taiwan, which I suspected had something to do with the recent storms. I wasn't sure that we were through with them. Even though the sky above us was blue, I noticed a mass of accumulating dark clouds in the east.

There were more non-Fijians around us than I expected, with a lot of tourists from Australia and New Zealand. After Gervaso's talk, I found myself suspicious of everyone. Anyone could be an Elgen.

We split up into three groups and took taxis from the airport to a hotel near the center of the island. Gervaso told us that the hotel had not been checked out for security, so at his friend's suggestion, we met up in a small café called the Bad Dog. It was a simple burger and

pizza joint with a lot of wood paneling and vines growing across the ceiling. Gervaso spoke briefly to the woman at the counter, and she led us to a back room.

“We’re safe here,” Gervaso said. “We can talk.”

“When are we going to meet your friend?” I asked.

“Soon,” Gervaso said. Then his expression changed. “Actually, that’s him right now.”

I followed his gaze to a man coming in through the door. He looked to be about Gervaso’s age, short with dark brown skin contrasted by piercing blue eyes. He had a shaven head, and a large scar ran across his throat and jaw.

He limped toward us, leaning on an ebony cane inlaid with red, blue, and yellow gems.

“J.D.,” Gervaso said, standing.

The man smiled. “Gervaso, my friend.”

The two men embraced.

“I did not think I would see you in my part of the world.”

“Appropriately, fate is not through with us,” Gervaso said. He turned toward us. “Everyone, this is my friend Captain J.D.” He looked back. “J.D., these are my friends.”

J.D. nodded. “Your friends, my cargo.” As his gaze panned over us, he stopped on Taylor. “And beautiful cargo.”

Taylor blushed a little. The captain stepped forward, offering his hand. “Lovely lady, what is your name?”

“Taylor,” she said, extending her hand uneasily.

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I might just have to keep this one for myself.”

Taylor looked uncomfortable with his comment. Blinking, I stood up and put out my hand so he would release Taylor’s. “I’m Michael.”

He took my hand but suddenly jerked back. “You shocked me.”

Gervaso frowned at me even though I honestly hadn’t intended to shock him.

“Must be static in the air,” I said.

J.D. grinned. “Indeed. You must be Michael Vey. Am I to understand that this ruby belongs to you?”

“She’s my girlfriend,” I said. “Not a rock.”

He raised his hands. "Forgive me. I meant no offense, brother. You are a lucky man."

"Thank you," Taylor said softly.

He looked at all of the girls. "So many beauties." Then he turned to Gervaso. "There is one extra with you."

Welch stood. "I'm John," he said. "John Watts. I was a last-minute addition to the party."

J.D. looked at him with a peculiar gaze, then said, "Mr. Watts, welcome to our adventure." He looked back at us. "Have you ordered any food yet?"

"No," Gervaso said. "We were waiting for you."

"Please, allow me." He turned and raised his hand to signal a server standing outside the door. "You all like pizza, yes?"

"Yes," Ostin said.

"Here, they have cannibal pizza."

"I just threw up," Taylor said.

"Do not worry your pretty face," J.D. said. "It is not man flesh. It is lamb meat."

"Not much better," Taylor said.

"Speaking of man flesh," Jack said. "I hear that you took a bullet for Gervaso."

J.D. cocked his head. "Oh? Where did you hear that?"

"Gervaso," Jack said.

J.D. lifted a fork and rammed it into his leg so it stuck.

McKenna screamed, and J.D. smiled. "Yes, I took a bullet. But I got this leg as a souvenir."

"Always dramatic," Gervaso said. "You always were."

* * *

A waitress walked into our room, and J.D. ordered eight pizzas and five garlic breads, plus bottles of water and grape juice. Surprisingly, the cannibal pizza was actually my favorite.

By the time we finished our meal, it was dark outside and the restaurant was mostly empty. Gervaso walked over and looked out the door, then shut it. "Ian, keep an eye out," he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d like you all to hear from Captain J.D.,” Gervaso said. “He will go over our plan.”

“Thank you, my friend,” J.D. said. He looked us over. “You missed a very big storm. There was a lot of flooding. It’s just today that the city is back to normal.

“As you know, this adventure we are on is very risky. The plan was to leave tomorrow. That is, if we are crazy enough to stick to that plan.”

“What do you mean?” Gervaso asked.

“When you got off the airplane, did you see the clouds in the east? There is another big storm coming. It is scheduled to hit the islands about three days from now.”

Gervaso’s face turned pale. “The same time we arrive in Tuvalu.”

“That means we can’t sail back,” Zeus said.

“We can in the *Joule*,” I said.

Gervaso breathed out heavily. “How long will the storm last?”

“The weather service says three days.”

“We’d never survive three days in Tuvalu. So what are our choices?”

“We stay in Fiji another week.”

“And abandon Tara and Torstyn,” Welch said. “They’ll be fed to the rats by then.”

“Better them than us,” Zeus said.

“There’s another choice,” I said. “We leave as expected and steal the *Joule*. Wasn’t that the plan all along?”

“But this way there’s no backup plan,” Tessa said.

“I know.” I breathed out heavily. “I think we all know that there never was a failure or retreat option. What were we going to do if we failed—try to sail back? There’s no way that we could go undetected. The Elgen have planes, missiles, and speedboats. They’d just sink us at sea.” I shook my head. “There’s no turning back. There never was.”

“Burn the boats,” Ostin said.

“What?” Tessa asked. “Burn what boats?”

Ostin breathed out. “Cortés sunk his ships so that his men would have to conquer or die.” He looked around at all of us with a serious expression. “It’s happened throughout history. The Chinese warlord

Xiang Yu at the battle of Julu ordered their ships to be burned so there could be no retreat. So did the Burmese King Bayinnaung when facing a superior army. They both went on to win their battles.” He looked at me. “There is no other option. We burn the boats.”

I think that might have been Ostin’s most courageous moment.

Gervaso looked around the room, then turned to J.D. “Will you sail?”

He thought for a moment, then nodded. “If you will go, I will sail.”

Gervaso took another deep breath. “If anyone wants out, now is the time. Just raise your hand.”

I looked around the room. I kind of expected Tanner to raise his hand, but he didn’t. No one did. After a minute Gervaso said, “Okay. We leave first thing in the morning. May God sail with us.”

As the rest of us were leaving, Ostin walked up to J.D.

“I’m Ostin. I don’t mean to bother you, but I was wondering how you reached a contractual relationship with the Elgen. Did they come to you, or did you go to them?”

J.D. looked at him with an annoyed expression, then turned away without answering.

“It was a valid question,” Ostin said softly.

* * *

That night most of us gathered in Jack’s room to play cards. In the middle of our second game, Ostin said, “I’ve got a bad feeling about this J.D. guy.”

“Why?” Zeus said. “Because he stuck a fork into his leg?”

“Prosthetic,” Ostin corrected. “He’s rude. And I don’t like the way he looks at me. He’s got the look of a cat outside a birdcage.”

“Maybe he just hates teenagers,” Zeus said.

“He doesn’t hate Taylor.”

“Don’t go there,” Taylor said.

“Maybe he just hates you,” Zeus said.

“That’s understandable,” Tessa said.

Ostin looked at her. “What do you mean by that?”

I changed the subject. “No, Ostin’s right. I can’t explain it, but he seems a little . . . off.”

“Hey, the dude saved Gervaso’s life in Iraq,” Jack said. “He took a bullet for him. What more endorsement do you want?”

After a moment I said, “You’re right. It’s probably just nerves. How far are we from Tuvalu, anyway?”

“Gervaso said it’s a three-day trip from Fiji,” Ian said. “If we leave around noon tomorrow, we’ll arrive Saturday night. There’s nothing to do, so you might want to get some magazines. Lots of magazines. And seasickness pills.”

Taylor nodded. “Lots and lots of seasickness pills.”



Wednesday morning I woke to the crack of thunder. I sat bolt upright in bed. I showered, which seemed a little redundant since the entire outside world was already water and I'd no doubt be sick of it by the end of the day. At least this water was hot.

We met up for breakfast at the café across from the hotel. I had a loaf of native sweet bread and some Fiji gram tea.

Tessa looked out at the weather. "I thought it wasn't supposed to rain for another three days."

"That's when the tropical storm hits," Ostin said. "This is nothing. It's just inclement weather."

"Inclement," Tanner said. "Why can't you just say *bad* weather like a normal person?"

"Because intelligent people use the most exact word to precisely communicate their intentions. I don't suspect you'd know anything about that."

Tanner was speechless.

“Touché,” Tessa said.

Taylor glanced over at me. “Never seen that before.”

“He’s figuring it out,” I said.

* * *

After breakfast we all followed Gervaso down to the harbor. As we walked down the dock, our boat bobbed up and down in a turbulent sea, pounding against the rubber-tire bumpers on the dock.

“Are we really going to sail in this?” Taylor asked.

“J.D. says it’s no problem.” I looked into her eyes. “At least we won’t sink.”

“Just throw up a few hundred times,” Taylor said. “I should have gotten some of those seasickness patches.”

“I can help,” Abigail said. “Seasickness is a specialty of mine.”

“Maybe the bad weather will help conceal us,” I said. I turned toward Zeus. He already looked green. “How are you doing?”

“This isn’t going to be good,” he said.

I shook my head. “No, it’s not. You sure you want to do this?”

“I’m sure I *don’t* want to.”

“I hear you, Zeus. I hear you.”



In spite of the weather, the first day sailing was boring and uneventful, which, all things considered, was a good thing.

It rained most of the day, so we were stuck together below deck. Nobody had much to say. Maybe the boredom wasn't such a bad thing. At least it made us hungrier for action.

Jack had brought his playing cards, and we played like a hundred games of Texas Hold'em. We even let Ian play, which is kind of ridiculous, since he could see through the cards and always knew what everyone else was holding.

The second day was a little better. The weather calmed some, and although the skies were still gray, the rain only fell intermittently throughout the day. Zeus even came up on deck for a while.

We tried fishing. Jack borrowed poles from one of the deckhands, and Ian was especially useful. He'd tell us where the fish were or if one was about to bite. I hadn't ever thought of all the things Ian's

power could be valuable for, but he'd be especially great at oceanography, as he could see reefs and all sorts of marine life.

He also saw a sunken galleon. We were going too fast to be sure, but he thought it had chests filled with gold doubloons. Jack got the GPS coordinates from the boat's first officer so we could go back someday and check it out.

Taylor caught a halibut. Ostin caught a twelve-foot hammerhead shark, though I'm not sure that "caught" was the right word. "Annoyed" is probably better. The monster fish yanked the pole out of Ostin's hands, and everyone laughed about that except the guy from the crew who actually owned the pole. He was pretty mad. He called Ostin an *oolu-cow*. None of us knew what it meant, except maybe Ostin, who turned bright red. The crew member told Ostin that he'd have to buy him a new fishing pole.

It was nice to be above deck and be able to take our minds off things for a while, especially Zeus, who was pretty much confined below deck the whole time. It wasn't just the rain or the threat of hitting water. Just seeing it made him crazy anxious. I could understand. It's how I would feel if we were sailing on an ocean of sulfuric acid. I couldn't help but feel he was suffering more than the rest of us. But there was no way around it. In the end, there would be plenty of suffering to go around.

* * *

We didn't see a whole lot of J.D., as he spent his time up in the boat's control deck. Gervaso spent a lot of time with him. At night Gervaso would tell us what they had talked about: the old days, old friends, changes in the military, and what J.D. knew about the Elgen.

I didn't see much of Welch either, as he kept mostly to himself. That second day Taylor woke me in the middle of the night.

"Michael."

It took me a moment to remember where I was. "Taylor?"

She was kneeling on the floor near my bed. Even in the darkness I could see that she had been crying. "I had a dream."

I took her hand as I sat up. "Tell me about it."

“We were on an island. It was small, like fifty feet. And we were with some other people. I don’t know who they were; they looked like island people. And suddenly we were surrounded by crocodiles. Thousands of them. They were coming from every side. We kept fighting them back, but they just kept coming. And then there were too many of them and they started eating our people.

“They were just about to eat us when lightning hit and killed all the crocodiles and everything turned to glass. . . .”

Her words trailed off into silence. For a moment neither of us spoke. Then I said, “That’s good, then. Right? The crocodiles were killed.”

Taylor looked into my eyes. “No, it’s not good. The lightning hit you. And I couldn’t find you.” Her eyes welled up.

“Come here,” I said. She climbed up onto my berth with me and I held her. “It’s just a dream,” I said, forcing the words. “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just a dream.”

I barely slept the rest of the night.

* * *

Late afternoon of the third day the storm returned in force. At times the waves were big enough to make me wonder if the ship was going to tip over. We were all seasick.

The sky was dark long before nightfall, and as we neared Tuvalu, the rains were torrential. We knew we were close as we huddled beneath the deck, trying to get a little sleep before our first test. A little after ten at night Gervaso came and found me.

“Michael, it’s time we brought everyone together. We’re an hour from docking on Nike.”

“Any sign of trouble?”

“No. The Elgen are expecting us.” He corrected himself. “Hopefully not us, the boat. We’ll meet in the mess in ten minutes. I’ll get Welch.”

I got Taylor, and then we gathered everyone to the dining room. Gervaso and Welch were already there, bent over a map. They had

taped the corners of the map to the main table and were drawing on it in pencil. They stopped when we arrived.

“Hurry in,” Gervaso said. “Gather around the table. We haven’t much time.”

We surrounded the table.

“The original Nike landing team consisted of Michael, Taylor, Ian, Zeus, Tessa, McKenna, and Jack, with Michael leading. But with this weather we’ll have to take Zeus out of the mix.”

Zeus looked too sick to care.

“I think we should bring Nichelle to take out the cameras,” I said, glancing at her. “She’ll also be valuable in case Quentin decides not to cooperate.”

“Good call,” Gervaso said, looking at Nichelle. “You good with that?”

“I’m good,” she said. “May I drop Quentin once, just for old times’ sake?”

I looked at her. “No.”

She grinned. “Never hurts to ask.”

“I’m coming too,” Welch said. “Quentin should see that I’m with you. He’s going to be disoriented enough.”

“Like you being with us won’t be disorienting,” Jack said.

“Just us rescuing him is going to be disorienting,” I said. “But I agree that Welch should come. In case things go wrong, he knows the Elgen procedures.”

Gervaso said, “That leaves me, Zeus, Cassy, Ostin, Abi, and Tanner to hold the boat.”

“We can do it,” Zeus said.

“If our cover is blown and they attack the boat, our goal is to get onshore. We’ll have better odds fighting on land. Michael, if that happens, we’ll radio you, and your team can flank them from the rear.”

“We can do that.”

Gervaso leaned back over the map, touching it with a pencil. “This is where we’ll be docking. The landing team will be wearing rain ponchos and getting off the boat with the rest of the loading crew, then they’ll gather here behind the warehouse.

“The central square is less than a quarter mile from the dock. You’ll use this trail right here. It’s an old goat path the natives use. It’s not lighted. You can take it all the way to here, the outer wall of the square.” He touched the end of the pencil to a point near the center of the map. “From here you’ll take out the lights and cameras, then advance to here. Taylor will reboot the guards, and Michael and Jack will take them out.”

“With pleasure,” Jack said.

“I can help,” Welch said.

“Good,” Gervaso said. “Nichelle, we’re going to use the weather to our benefit. Don’t take out the lights and camera until there’s a lightning strike. Then, with Tessa’s help, blow them. With luck the Elgen will assume it’s the weather.

“At that precise moment, Taylor will reboot the guards, and Michael, Jack, and David will take them out: Jack and David at the prime minister’s cage to the west, Michael at Quentin’s cage to the east.

“Once they’re down, McKenna, Tessa, and Nichelle will come around to the back of the cage. The cage has a built-in door lock and also a chain with a padlock. McKenna will melt through the bars and chain to get Quentin out. He’s not going to be in very good shape, so you’ll probably need to help him walk. You might even have to carry him.

“As soon as you have him, get back to the boat as soon as possible.” He looked around the table. “All clear?”

“Crystal,” I said.

“Good.” He leaned back. “You know, this weather is a blessing. Chances of running into anyone out there are much less likely.”

“Where do we get our ponchos?” I asked.

“Come with me. You’ll suit up with the boat’s crew. The rest of you, eat a banana or something.”



PART EIGHT



Captain J.D. had planned to reach Niulakita, the first of the Tuvalu islands, around seven p.m., but the weather had set the boat back nearly four hours. When the island was within sight, J.D. radioed in. “Come in, Nike port. This is *Risky Business*, do you copy?”

“*Risky Business*, this is Elgen base Nike port. We copy you. Provide passcode.”

“Yes, Elgen base. *I-L-K-M-E*.”

“Passcode clear. What do you have to report?”

“Cargo is secure and complete. I am prepared to deliver.”

“We are pleased to hear that, *Risky Business*.”

“. . . And tell the general that I brought him a bonus.”

“You can tell him yourself, *Risky Business*.”

There was a brief pause. Then a new voice came over the headset. “This is Admiral Hatch.”

Captain J.D. was a bit ruffled to have Hatch actually speak to him. “Admiral. This is an honor.”

“What is this bonus you spoke of?”

“The man you’ve been looking for. The one they call Welch. I understand there is a million-dollar bounty on his head.”

Hatch couldn’t believe his good fortune. “Please repeat, Captain.”

“I have the fugitive EGG Welch. He is with the children.”

A dark smile crossed Hatch’s face. “And to think I said there is no God. Everything changes today.” He turned back to the microphone. “You just earned a million dollars, Captain. What is their plan?”

“They first plan to sail to Nike to rescue the Glow Quentin. Then they sail to Hades to rescue the other two Glows.”

“Torstyn and Tara,” the radioman said.

“We could sink the boat before it reaches us,” the Zone Captain behind Hatch said.

“Admiral, please don’t sink my boat,” J.D. said.

“We won’t sink your boat,” Hatch said, even though he was considering it. After a moment he said, “No, let them follow through with their plan. Alert no one. I don’t want them to know we are aware of them.”

“We attack them in Nike?” the Zone Captain asked.

“No, too much possible collateral damage. We’ll let them rescue Quentin and sail to Hades. We will bring them all together and destroy them once and for all. Radio me after you leave Nike.”

“Yes, sir. Over.”

Hatch took off his headset and stood back from the microphone. “Today I will feast on my enemy.”



PART NINE



It was a little past three in the morning when we reached Nike. The rain fell in great sheets illuminated by the shore's electric lighting. From where I was watching, the island looked deserted. As Gervaso said, it wasn't the kind of night someone was going to be out on a midnight stroll.

Our team had put on our rain gear and had blended in with the rest of the loading crew who were preparing the crane to lift the crates from below deck. They were carrying canned goods from New Zealand: concentrated milk, butter, cheese, and frozen beef.

As our boat edged up to the main loading dock in front of a landing with warehouses and parked forklifts, there was a bright flash of lightning, followed just two seconds later by a clap of thunder.

"That was close," Jack said.

"Let's hope the lightning keeps up," Taylor said.

I looked up at the angry sky. “I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that.”

There were three lights on the dock as well as lights inside the warehouse offices, but I couldn’t see any movement, at least not the human kind. The wind was strong and anything not bolted down was flapping or swinging. The waves had also kicked up, and J.D. revved the engine in reverse to keep us from slamming into the dock.

Then two Elgen wearing rain gear emerged from the warehouse. Both carried flashlights, and one of them made hand signals to the control deck.

Three of our crew members came out holding lines and threw them to the men, who grabbed them and wrapped the ropes around the dock’s heavy cleats and secured them. Another man walked out in rain gear carrying a radio.

Our crew members lowered a plank onto the dock, and one of our crew walked down to the man holding the radio. The two of them walked back to the warehouse.

“That’s your cue,” Gervaso said. “Go.”

The eight of us climbed down a ladder near the front of the boat. Then, one by one, we sprinted across the deck into the shadows behind the warehouse, then into the forest.

We met up in a grove of breadfruit trees about fifty yards from the dock. In our outfits I couldn’t tell who was who.

“Who’s here?” I asked.

“Everyone’s here,” Ian said.

“You lead us,” I said.

We followed Ian along a narrow grass path through the dense forest. The sound of the rain covered our footsteps, and it only took ten minutes to reach the center square.

The center was dark. There were only a few lights in the square, and raindrops fiercely pelted the tops of the two monkey cages, pouring down the sides of the cages in a steady waterfall. The cages were dark inside, and I couldn’t see any humans, but Ian could.

“Quentin’s in the corner of the east cage,” he said. “In the back.”

“How does he look?”

He turned to me. “Like a man in a monkey cage.”

There were two guards, one for each cage, standing at attention with rifles. They were dressed alike, wearing hats, black knee-length jackets, thick-soled shin-high boots, and pants with a purple stripe down the side. They stood perfectly still as the water bounced off the crowns of their hats and ran down the brims and their shoulders. They seemed to be in an almost trancelike state.

“There’s a sign that says ‘King of the Monkeys,’” Ian said, shaking his head.

“Should I reboot them now?” Taylor asked.

“Cameras first,” I said. I could see at least six cameras, revealed by the red diode on top of them. Four of them slowly panned the square. I turned to Ian. “I count six. What have you got?”

“There’s fourteen,” he said.

“It’s good to be you,” I said. “Are there any other guards nearby?”

“Just the two.”

“Let’s keep it that way. Are you ready, Nichelle? Tessa?”

“I’m ready,” Tessa said. “You?” she asked Nichelle.

“Just waiting for lightning.”

We didn’t have to wait long. In less than two minutes there was a double strike of lightning to the east of us. Nichelle’s hand was already extended. The lights went out.

“Did we get all the cameras?” I asked Ian.

“No. There’s one camera next to the building that’s live. But I don’t think it’s panning.”

“Will they see us?”

Ian looked at it, then said, “No. Not if we stay close to the cages.”

“Then let’s do this. Everyone back off a little.” I turned to Taylor and nodded.

Taylor looked toward the guards, holding her hand up to her forehead. Suddenly the guards froze. One of them dropped his rifle.

“Now,” I said. I reached out and pulsed. A massive wave blurred the air, sizzling with the rain it devoured. Both of the guards were knocked off their feet. A few of the monkeys fell off branches as well, screeching loudly.

“That’s always cool to watch,” Jack said. “Let’s go.”

We ran toward the cage.

Jack and Welch grabbed the guards and dragged them over to the back of the east cage, then handcuffed them with their own cuffs.

That's when I saw Quentin. He was dirty and huddled in the corner of the cage. He had partially covered himself with some of the dead palm leaves, but he was still shivering in the cold. He looked pathetic, and in spite of our history, I felt pity. Even the smell of the cage, somewhat dampened by the fresh rain air, was torture.

"Quentin," I said.

He looked up at me, and his eyes showed his disbelief. "Vey?"

"It's me."

"Kill me. Please."

"I'm not going to kill you."

Welch walked up behind me. "Quentin, it's me. We're getting you out."

Quentin rubbed the water that was running down his face. "Why are you with Vey? I'm already losing my mind."

"No," Welch said. "We're working together. Now move away from the back of the cage. Hurry."

As soon as he did, there was a brilliant orange-blue light behind him, followed by the sound of water hissing and monkeys screeching as they fled to the far, opposite corner of the cage. Even fifteen feet away I could feel the air warm up around me.

McKenna stood on the platform behind the cage with Tessa supporting her, McKenna holding the metal chain in her hand, which was too bright to look at.

In less than a minute the chain slid from around the cage's bars like a metallic snake, then fell to the ground.

"That's one," Ian said. "Now the door lock."

McKenna examined the lock assembly, not quite sure where to touch. She put her hand on the bolt and heated up. The entire unit turned orange-red but didn't collapse. The heat was intense enough that we were all sweating, but still the lock held.

McKenna's power was different from Bryan's, as Bryan could force heat in a direct, concentrated path, while McKenna created more heat but in a broader circumference.

After a minute I said, "This is taking too long."

“I can’t do it,” McKenna said.

“Ian, what’s wrong?” I asked.

He looked at the door for a moment, then said, “McKenna, ignore the lock. The weakest part is the hinges. Other side.”

McKenna and Tessa moved on the platform. McKenna could get her fingers around the hinges, which meant she could better control the heat between them.

I looked around the square, then at Jack. “Anything?”

“Nothing,” he said. “We’re alone.”

Luck seemed to be on our side, which was something I wasn’t accustomed to. It was also something I didn’t trust.

The top hinge broke through in less than a minute. “Got it,” McKenna said. She grabbed the bottom hinge and heated up.

Just a half minute in, the second hinge creaked as it twisted and then broke through and the heavy metal door fell back toward the exhausted girls. Welch must have guessed what was going to happen, because he had run up behind them and grabbed the heavy door as it fell, pushing it to the side. The door landed with a sharp crash on the wet cobblestone below.

“That could have cut off my leg,” McKenna said.

“It didn’t,” Welch said. “Now get back.”

Tessa helped McKenna down to the base of the steps, where Nichelle handed her two open bottles of water.

“Q,” Welch said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Quentin forced himself to his feet. He was basically naked, wearing just a loincloth. Welch took his hand and helped him to the cage entrance.

“Can you walk?”

“Yes,” he said, though he seemed unstable on his feet.

“He doesn’t have shoes,” I said.

“He does now,” Nichelle said. She had already removed one of the guard’s boots. “His feet looked about your size.”

Quentin stared at her. “Nichelle?”

“You never know who you’re going to run into at the zoo,” she said.

Welch put the shoes on Quentin’s feet and laced them up. I gave him my poncho to wear. “Hurry,” I said. “We’ve got to get out of

here.”

Quentin looked over at the other cage. “We need to rescue the prime minister.”

I glanced at the cage, then at Jack, who was shaking his head.

“Not now,” I said. “We’re out of time.”

* * *

Jack and Welch both took one of Quentin’s arms, and we ran directly into the shadow of the forest, retracing our route along the goat path. We were slightly slower with Quentin, but we still made good time.

We stopped at the side of the warehouse. For some reason, the dock lights had been turned off and our boat was a dark silhouette against the turbulent sea.

“How does it look?” I asked Ian.

“Peaceful.”

“Why are the lights out?”

“Maybe the storm took out the generator.”

“It’s a Starxource plant.” I took out my radio. “Gervaso. Are we clear?”

There was a burst of static, then Gervaso’s voice. “We’re clear.”

“Why are the lights out?”

“I don’t know. They just turned them off. Do you have him?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll meet you at the aft ladder.”

We moved in the dark to the back of the boat, then crossed the dock in small groups, first Tessa, Nichelle, and McKenna, followed by Jack, Welch, and Quentin.

Taylor, Ian, and I waited until last to make sure no one had followed us, or to reboot any warehouse crew that might take interest in us. No one did. I’m sure it was the hour, but it still worried me that the security was so lax. It seemed suspicious.

I was the last one on board, and Gervaso helped pull me up on deck.

“I sent everyone below,” Gervaso said. “Come with me.” We climbed to the boat’s upper deck.

“How did everything go?” he asked.

“We had a little trouble opening the cage, but otherwise everything went as planned. It was easy.”

Gervaso’s brow fell. “Easy?”

“I know. When has anything with the Elgen been easy? It could be a trap.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they’re just overconfident. Like they were in Peru.” Gervaso breathed out. “For now we keep to the plan until we know otherwise. Come with me. I need to report to J.D.”

I followed Gervaso into the control room.

The captain spun around as we entered the control deck. “You made it, my friends,” he said, sounding relieved. “Did all go well?”

“As planned,” I said.

“Very good. And everyone is on board?”

“Yes.”

“Even Mr. Welch?”

I thought it odd that he had singled him out. “Yes.”

Gervaso looked at J.D. with a peculiar expression, then said, “We’re all here. We need to go.” He turned to me. “Let’s go back down, Michael.”

Gervaso and I walked back out of the control deck into the rain. When we were on the main deck, Gervaso said, “I’ve made a terrible mistake. I think we’re in trouble.”

My chest froze. “Why?”

“We never told J.D. what Welch’s real name was.”



The boat was untied, and we pushed away from the dock into the turbulent channel. From Nike we would sail north. Hades was the Elgen's prison island and the second-northernmost island of the Tuvalu archipelago.

Just as the weather service had predicted, the storm was getting worse and the waves were now white-capped. The boat slammed angrily against the dark waters. At twenty-five knots it would take us about seven hours to reach our destination. That would make our arrival time around noon, but considering the weather, we'd probably arrive much later. And now we realized that there was a good chance we were sailing into a trap.

"What do we do?" I asked Gervaso.

"If he's collaborating with the enemy, we can't let on that we know. Not yet. We're surrounded by the Elgen's most fortified bases. If the Elgen attacked now, we wouldn't last five minutes."

“We could go back to Nike and attack their headquarters. If we could capture Hatch . . .”

“We don’t know that Hatch is even there. And if we make J.D. turn around, the Elgen will know something’s wrong. They’ll be waiting for us.” He looked at me. “We need to talk to Welch. Get Jack, too.”

I went down to the eating quarters, where Welch, Jack, Zeus, and Nichelle were sitting around Quentin at the main table. There was bread, crackers, cheese, and sliced meats, and Quentin, who was now wrapped in a dry blanket, was eating ravenously. He stopped eating when he saw me.

In the light I was stunned by how different he looked. Broken. Humble. He was anything but the cocky rich kid I’d met in Peru. I guess living in a monkey cage will do that. So will Cell 25.

“Michael,” he said, starting to stand.

I raised my hand to stop him. “Just sit.”

“Thank you,” he said, slightly collapsing. “My quads are pretty cramped. Welch just told me that we’re going to rescue Torstyn and Tara.”

“We’re going to try.”

“Let me know how I can help. I’m the reason they’re there.”

“No,” Welch said. “I am.”

“Hatch is,” I said. “And we’ll definitely need your help.” I turned to Welch. “Gervaso needs to see you. You too, Jack. He’s on deck.”

“All right,” Welch said.

They both stood, and I led them up top to Gervaso, who was standing in the dark midship beneath a canopy.

“Yes, sir,” Welch said.

“Have you talked to the captain alone?” Gervaso asked.

“Captain J.D.? No. Why?”

“He knows who you are.”

Welch’s face tensed. “Is he Elgen?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the plan?” Jack asked.

“That’s why I wanted to see you. If this is a trap, we’ll need a solid base to fight from. Or should we go straight to the *Joule*?”

“Not at this hour,” Welch said. “No one, not even an EGG, would visit the *Joule* in the middle of the night. There’s too great a chance they’ll submerge.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“*Joule* protocol is that a false submersion will go unpunished. A non-submersion, even in practice, when one is required, results in automatic death to the captain. The odds are that they’ll submerge and stay down for days. Maybe weeks.”

“We can’t take that chance,” I said.

“What island do we go to?” Gervaso asked.

“We have three options,” Welch said. “Hades, Hephaestus, and Demeter. Hades is the prison island, Hephaestus is the Elgen manufacturing, and Demeter is agriculture.”

“Which one would you choose?”

“Hades will have more stationed guards, but there will also be weapons and fortifications to dig in. We could also release the GPs and native prisoners to fight with us. Hephaestus is just factories, no food or weapons. They could quarantine the island and starve us out. Demeter has food, but it’s just fields and jungle. Little weaponry. All we’ll have to fight with is what we have on us. I’d go with Hades.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Hades it is,” Gervaso said. “There’s still hope that we’re wrong about J.D.”

“How are we going to know for sure?”

“Taylor,” Gervaso said. He looked around. “Jack?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell everyone they have six hours to rest and they’re going to need it. They need to be ready for battle.”

“Yes, sir.”

“At ten I’ll need you, Michael, Welch, Zeus, Ian, and Taylor to come with me to the control deck.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack said again.

* * *

I went below deck to check on Taylor but found her, Nichelle, and McKenna sleeping. I lay down next to Taylor, my heart pounding wildly. Not surprisingly, I couldn't sleep, and an hour later I got up and went back up top. In spite of the weather, Welch was sitting on a bench smoking.

I sat down next to him. For a while neither of us spoke. Visible to the east of us was a long strip of land.

"What island is that?" I asked.

"Hatch calls it Plutus. It was Nukufetau. It's where he's building the bullion depository, his own private Fort Knox."

Even though our visibility was limited by darkness, rain, and fog, I could see that there were cranes and massive construction going on.

"Look," Welch said softly, pointing to a shadow in the water. "There she is."

What I saw looked like a large, rectangular buoy.

"What is it?"

"The *Joule*."

I had seen the *Joule* only once before, in Lima, just before we sank the *Ampere*, only this time it was mostly submerged, exposing only the conning tower. Again it was docked close to shore.

Welch took a long drag from his cigarette and stared out in silence.

"I thought Elgen guards didn't smoke," I said.

"They don't." He offered me the cigarette. "Want one?"

"I'm fifteen," I said.

"Not tonight you're not."

"I'll pass," I said.

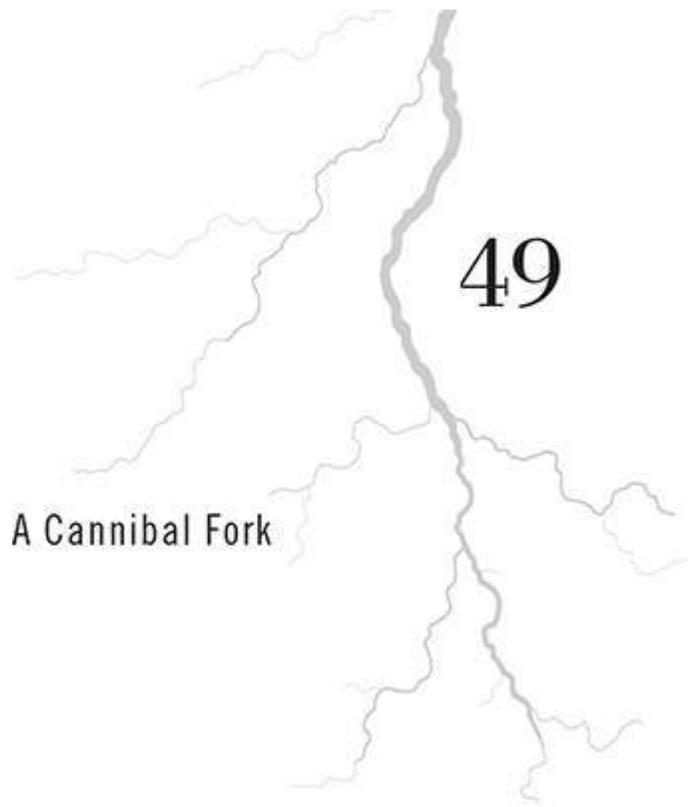
After a few minutes he said, "I hope I get to die slowly of cancer."

* * *

After a half hour I went back down to our quarters. Ostin was asleep and snoring loudly, which this time made me happy. It was familiar and peaceful in its own way.

I worried about him. Quentin felt remorseful that he'd dragged Torstyn and Tara to their deaths, but, in my own way, I was just as guilty. Ostin wouldn't have been here if it wasn't for me. He'd

probably be graduating from Harvard at seventeen and getting a job with the highest bidder, Elgen Inc. That's what I was thinking about when I fell asleep.



“Michael, wake up.” I looked up to see Gervaso standing above me. “It’s time.”

It took a moment for recognition to sink in. I was hoping the night before had just been a nightmare. It was, just not the sleeping kind.

It was ten o’clock in the morning, not early, but I’d still only gotten a few hours of sleep. And it didn’t look like morning. There was no sign of the sun.

After I got up, Gervaso and I went around waking everyone and telling them to eat and prepare to dock. Then Welch, Jack, Taylor, Ian, Zeus, and I followed Gervaso up to the control deck. Ostin came as well, even though he hadn’t been invited.

Outside the door to the control deck Gervaso said to Taylor, “I need you to stand next to J.D. I need you to read his mind.”

We still hadn’t told everyone else about our concern, so Taylor looked surprised. “Why?”

“We have reason to believe that he’s working with the Elgen.”

Taylor blanched. “I’ll stay close.”

We walked into the control deck single file. There were three crew members along with Captain J.D., who was in his chair. The men were speaking in Fijian but stopped as we entered.

“Good morning, friends,” J.D. said. “You see our destination ahead, just as planned.”

Ahead of us in the far distance was a sliver of land. It looked bleak, like a South Pacific version of Alcatraz. It had a five-hundred-meter-tall radio tower held up by guy wires stretching hundreds of yards in each direction. A series of red lights flashed near the top of the tower. A light plume of steam rose above the island, mixing in with the dark, low-lying clouds. The Elgen had burned almost every tree on the island, leaving it black and desolate.

“There’s your Hades,” J.D. said.

“Yeah, it looks like hell,” Jack replied.

“Why is there steam coming off the island?” Taylor asked.

“It must have a small Starxource plant,” Ostin said.

We were all quiet. There was a dark foreboding, made more so by the lightning and weather.

“Did you see that?” Taylor asked. “Lightning just struck the tower.”

“It’s the tallest thing around for a thousand miles,” Ostin said. “It probably gets struck hundreds of times a year. And technically, it’s a mast, not a tower.”

“What’s the difference?” I asked.

“Towers stand on their own. Masts have wires that hold them up.”

“It’s a tower,” Jack said.

* * *

As we neared the island, we passed several Elgen shuttles. One of them looked like some kind of a prison barge with barred windows.

“Where’s the prison?” I asked. I’d seen a map of the island, but it was different seeing the land in real life.

“It’s on the other side of the island,” J.D. said. “There are two docks, an old one and the new dock for the prison. We will dock on

this side. Otherwise we will be seen by the prison guards.”

I turned to Ian. “Can you see anything?”

“There’s activity at the far dock. It must be a changing of shifts. There’s a boatload of guards leaving.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” I said. “The new guards will just be settling in.”

“I don’t see new guards,” he said.

“They wouldn’t come and go at the same time,” Ostin said. “The old guards won’t leave until the others have taken their place.”

“That’s what I mean,” he said. “I don’t see any guards at all. I see a lot of prisoners in their cells, but no guards.”

“That sounds like an evacuation, not a shift change,” Gervaso said.

“Why would they all be leaving?” I asked.

J.D. glanced at me. “You never know, Mr. Vey. The Elgen are always changing their ways.”

“We’ve got trouble,” Ian said. “There are two very large boats coming our way. I’ve never seen them before.”

Welch’s brow furrowed. “What do they look like?”

“One of them looks like a destroyer. The other one has a huge deck with helicopters on it.”

Welch’s brow furrowed still deeper. “It’s the *Edison* and the *Franklin*, Hatch’s new attack boats.”

“It’s no problem,” J.D. said. “They’re just on patrol.”

“Are you sure?” Taylor asked, walking up close to the captain.

J.D. put his hand on Taylor’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, honey. Everything will be just fine.”

Taylor’s face turned ashen, and then she shoved the captain away from her. J.D. laughed and turned to me. “You have a feisty girl there, Mike.”

“You were right,” Taylor said to us. “He’s betrayed us. He sold us out to Hatch.”

Jack and Welch pulled out guns. One of the crew members reached for a gun, and Zeus blasted him against the wall.

“What is this about?” J.D. said, trying to act innocent.

“You tell us,” Gervaso said. “Tell us why you betrayed us.”

“Why would I do that? You are my friends.”

He even sounded like a liar.

“He’s not a friend,” Taylor said. “He’s a traitor. He sold us all out for money. He wants the million-dollar bounty for Welch, and he asked Hatch if he could own me. As his pet.”

“I’m going to electrocute him,” I said.

Before I could shock him, Gervaso knocked him out of his seat with a punch. Then Gervaso jumped on him and continued to beat on him until his face was bloody. “Tell us what you did.”

J.D. cried out, “Okay, okay. I will tell you.”

Gervaso leaned back, his fists red and covered with blood. “Are the Elgen waiting for us?”

J.D. looked up at us from his back, terrified. “Yes.”

“We’re dead,” Jack said, taking over the boat’s steering.

“Not before he dies,” Zeus said. “I’m going to fry him slowly.”

“No,” Gervaso said. “Not yet. We need to know what he’s arranged. Taylor, come touch this scumbag. I need to be sure he’s telling the truth.”

“I’d rather touch vomit.”

“He is vomit,” Jack said.

Gervaso turned back to J.D. “If you lie once, Zeus will burn off your feet. Do you understand?”

“Just give me the word,” Zeus said, grabbing the man’s ankle.

His voice quivered. “I understand.”

“What arrangement did you make with the Elgen?”

“I told Hatch that I would bring all of you to him.”

Jack groaned out.

“Why didn’t the Elgen attack us at Nike?” I asked.

“Hatch wanted you to get to Hades. Then he was going to send his forces to surround the island.”

“To capture us?”

J.D. didn’t answer.

Gervaso repeated more forcefully. “To capture us?”

“No. He intends to kill everyone in battle.” He glanced at Taylor. “Except this girl. And Vey. He has ordered Vey to be taken alive. He has special plans for Vey.”

“What kind of plans?” I asked.

“An ancient Fiji tradition. He said to prepare the *ai cula ni bokola*.”

Ostin looked at me with horror. “It’s what I was telling you about. It’s the cannibal fork they used to eat people.”

For a moment I was speechless. “Hatch is planning to eat me?”

Taylor covered her mouth as if she were going to throw up.

“The general plans to serve you for the feast to celebrate the end of the resistance.”

I looked at J.D. “You knew this, and you were still going to deliver me to him?”

“What he does with you is not my business.”

“How much did they pay you for us?” Jack shouted. “Thirty pieces of silver?”

“How could you do this?” Gervaso said. “I trusted you.”

“I needed money,” he said.

“For what?”

“. . . For drugs.”

Gervaso’s fist balled up. “You pathetic piece of crap. When did you become a junkie?”

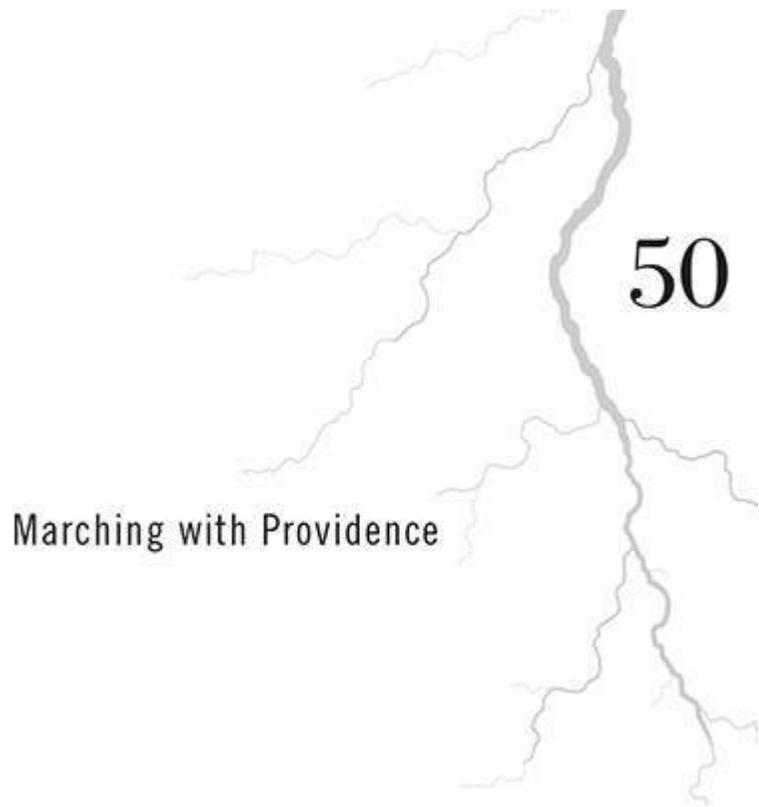
“It’s your fault,” J.D. said. “After I got shot saving you, they put me on painkillers. I got addicted. When the painkillers stopped working, I needed something stronger. If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t be a junkie. You share the blame.”

Gervaso spit on him. “You had a choice. Everyone has a choice. You took the cowardly way.

“And if you couldn’t handle it, you should have put a gun to your head instead of ours.”

J.D. was quiet for a moment, then said, “You’re right. I should have. But I didn’t.”

“No, you didn’t. But before we’re through, you’re going to wish you had.”



Gervaso took control of the boat while Jack, Zeus, Ian, Taylor, Welch, and I rounded up the rest of the *Risky Business* crew and brought them down to one of the berths. We tied them up, leaving them in a row on their stomachs. Everyone except for J.D., who we kept tied up on the control deck.

“If the boat sinks,” Jack said to the crew, “you drown. Choke on that karma.”

We returned to the control deck and told them what had happened. It was like reading the jury’s verdict of death. Everyone was quiet. Only Tanner seemed undisturbed, which was disturbing in its own way. I couldn’t get Hatch’s plan for me out of my mind.

“Maybe J.D.’s lying,” Tessa said. “Maybe he just made the whole thing up.”

“That would be like confessing to a murder you didn’t commit,” Jack said.

“He’s not lying,” Taylor said. “He sold us.”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Welch said. “We’ve got to turn the boat around.”

“And go where?” Gervaso said. “We don’t have enough fuel to get anywhere, we’re not fast enough to escape their boats, and even if we could, the cannon on their battleship can shoot more than twenty miles. They’ll just blow us out of the water.”

“Then where do we go?” Tessa asked. “The *Joule*?”

“No, we don’t have that option now,” Gervaso said. “It’s too far. Our best chance is to dig in at Hades and defend ourselves. Hatch built an inescapable prison to keep people in. Let’s see if it can keep them out.”

“They’ll surround us,” Jack said.

“We’re already surrounded,” Welch said.

“What if they decide to just starve us out?” Tessa asked.

“The prison’s got to have food and supplies,” Welch said.

“No,” Quentin said. “Hatch isn’t that patient. He’ll fight.”

“We’ve got to reach the island and break into prison before they reach us,” Gervaso said. “Jack, get us there.”

“Yes, sir.” Jack pushed the boat’s throttle all the way, and the front of the boat lifted with our speed.

“What do you see, Ian?” Gervaso asked.

“The *Faraday* is being loaded with soldiers. It looks like they’re bringing their whole army.”

“Fifteen of us versus ten thousand of them,” Welch said.

“Seventeen of us,” Quentin said. “We’ve got Tara and Torstyn.”

“And the prisoners and GPs,” Welch said. “They’ll fight. There are at least two hundred being held captive. They’ll fight for their lives.”

Gervaso turned to Welch. “Is there anything we should know about how the Elgen will fight?”

“Hatch likes spectacle. There’s no other reason why he didn’t just sink our ship. He did the same thing to me. If he weren’t a slave to his ego, he would have just executed me on the spot. Instead, he wanted to make a show of me being fed to the rats. I think this is what he’s doing now. The final battle of Elgen versus Electroclan. He wants a spectacle, something for the history books.”

“The bigger army doesn’t always win,” Ostin said. “Like George Washington crossing the Delaware to attack Trenton. He was outnumbered, with two thousand hungry, sick, poorly equipped soldiers when they attacked the superior, well-armed, rested mercenary Hessians—the most feared, well-trained soldiers in the world. Washington not only won, but he didn’t have a single soldier killed or wounded. Providence marched with them that day.” As if to punctuate the point, lightning lit the sky around us, followed by a loud thunderclap.

Welch looked up at the sky, then said, “Let’s hope providence is with us, too.”



We put a long chain, with a padlock, around J.D.'s neck, partially to secure him and partially so Taylor wouldn't have to touch him to read his thoughts.

As we neared the island, Gervaso said to J.D., "You need to help us dock. Remember, if the boat sinks, you're going down with it."

"The island is surrounded by reef," he said. "You have to dock the boat at the dock."

"He's telling the truth," Taylor said.

Welch, Gervaso, Jack, and I looked over a map of Hades. "That reef will be an advantage," Welch said. "It means they can't run their boats in all at once. After we disembark, we'll blow the dock. They'll have to swim in to get us. It's not easy to win a war waist-deep in water."

"That will slow them down," Gervaso said. "But not much."

"Maybe long enough for us to thin them out," Welch said.

* * *

The island of Hades was about a mile in circumference, flat and oddly shaped, like an amoeba. The water surrounding it was light and shallow, with a wide, coral reef visible from where we were, a hundred yards out. Surrounding the island was fine white sand, dark beneath the clouds. Under different circumstances it might have been a nice place to vacation.

There was an old town on the west side of the island. At one time there had been a post office, a community center, and a church. Now it was deserted except for a few apartments kept for the guards. At one time the island had been lush, completely covered with various palms, mostly coconut and breadfruit trees, but that was before the Elgen had burned the land, clearing it for the prison. The prison sat on roughly thirty acres on the west side of the island and was surrounded with two twenty-two-foot-tall chain-link fences topped with four feet of razor wire.

About fifty yards out from the prison fence the Elgen's GPs and slave labor, taken mostly from the Tuvaluan natives, had been forced to build an outer wall made of concrete. It was shorter than the other fence but still daunting—ten feet high with razor wire. The wall had been built for prisoners, but it had also been built as a protection from the sea and was added after a cyclone had hit the island, damaging the original construction. Its construction reminded me of what we saw in Taiwan's Starxource plant. "Creepycrete," Taylor called it, drab, formless construction based on the lowest denominator of function.

The entry to the prison was on the north side of the island, where the main dock was built. The Elgen guards had filled the last of the shuttles and were about to push off. To avoid them we sailed west, circling the island clockwise. As we came around the island, Jack slowed the boat down slightly. "I'll wait until you give me the go-ahead," he said to Ian.

"Are you sure it's not a trap?" I asked. "Why didn't they blow the dock?"

"Why are they leaving at all?" Zeus asked.

"Maybe the dock's booby-trapped."

“That would be the smart thing to do,” Ostin said.

“I don’t see anything, but I’ll keep looking,” Ian said.

Gervaso looked over the island with binoculars. “No, they’re giving us the prison. Apparently Hatch wants a fight.”

A few minutes later Ian said, “We’re clear. The last of them just circled the bend.”

“Got it.” Jack hit the throttle, and we sped east along the north bank of the island toward the prison.

By the time we reached the dock, there was no one in sight. The dock led to a landing, with a road leading to a break in the concrete wall. There were towers on every corner of the wall, but they appeared to be deserted as well.

“Why would they just desert it?” Tessa asked.

Ian surveyed the site once more, then said, “It’s still clear.”

“We’re going to have to blow the dock,” Gervaso said.

“Then I’ll move the boat after we dock,” Welch said. “Just in case we need it.”

Welch took over the boat’s controls and brought us up to the dock. With the size of the waves rocking our boat, we hit the side pretty hard, throwing us all to the port side of the boat.

“Nice landing,” Tanner said.

“Like to see you do better,” Tessa said.

“C’mon,” I said.

Jack and I jumped out onto the dock, and Ian and Tessa threw us the ropes so we could tie the boat onto the cleats. One by one everyone except Welch got off.

Zeus and Gervaso, using towels from the bathroom, blindfolded J.D. and his crew. Then Jack, Zeus, and I took them off the boat.

After everyone was off, Ian and I untied the ropes, and then Welch started to pull away from the dock. Suddenly one of the crew members pulled off his blindfold, then jumped in front of the boat into the sea, which was stupid on many levels. I couldn’t figure out what the guy’s plan was. Was he trying to get cut up in the boat’s propeller? Or was he planning to swim twenty miles to another island during a raging storm?

Zeus, covered in a formfitting rain suit and two ponchos, reacted quickly and shocked the dude just as he hit the ocean. The sound of electricity striking the water was like dropping ice into a pan of sizzling bacon. The man went under for nearly a minute, then popped back up. "I give up!" he shouted. "Don't shock me. I give up."

"Swim to shore," Zeus said. "Next time I won't let you surrender."

As we walked off the dock onto the island, I felt a dark, eerie feeling of desolation. A line from the Bible came to me: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . .*

Except I definitely feared. I was terrified of the evil to come.



Welch anchored the boat about a hundred feet east of the dock and about sixty feet from shore, just outside the reef. He had to swim in to shore, and he was soaked and dripping when he caught up to us. Actually, with the exception of Zeus, with the amount of rain falling we were all soaked by the time we reached the prison's main entrance.

Unfortunately, the guards had locked up after themselves. Ian examined the kind of lock used, then turned to McKenna. "It's mechanical. The best thing would be for you to melt the bolt."

"I can do that," McKenna said. She walked up to the door, pushing her slim fingers as far as she could between the crack. Her hand immediately went bright white. It took less than a minute for the metal to turn to molten steel and collapse.

"Anything waiting for us behind the door?" Gervaso asked.

Ian shook his head. "Just prisoners."

“Let me go first,” I said. “Just in case.” I put an electric field around me and pushed the door open and walked through.

As Ian had said, there was no one in sight. I turned back toward the others. “Come on.”

Gervaso was the first through the doorway, followed by the rest. The next door wasn't locked, but the power had been shut off inside the building. The room smelled musty like mold and was lit only by our glows, especially mine, which was now as bright as a sixty-watt bulb.

“I can help,” McKenna said. She lit up, brightly illuminating the room.

“How do we turn the power back on?” Gervaso asked Welch.

“The place is powered by a mini Starxource plant,” Welch said. “Whenever there's a plant, there's a central power office. It should be near the entrance.” He turned to Ian. “Just look for a room with thousands of wires moving into it. All roads lead to Rome, you know? Just find a wire and follow it.”

Ian began panning across the room, then stopped. “It's over there. It looks like a bowl of copper spaghetti.”

“That's the place. I can turn it back on. I'll need some light.”

“I'll go with you,” McKenna said.

“Me too,” Ostin said.

They walked off down the hall, and a few minutes later the lights came on. When they returned, Welch was carrying a roll of paper in his hands. “I found this.”

Gervaso stepped forward. “What have you got?”

“It's the building schematics. The Elgen usually keep a set in the main control room. We can use it to plan our defense.”

“What are we going to do with these clowns?” Jack asked, nodding toward J.D. and his crew.

“There's plenty of cells to lock them in,” Welch said. “That hall to the right leads to the interim cell. It's the closest to the command center.”

“How do I open the cell doors?” Jack asked.

“Everything can be controlled from the central control panel,” Welch said.

“I can do it,” Ostin said. “The controls will probably be similar to the academy’s.”

“Just hurry,” Gervaso said. “We haven’t much time.”

Jack and Zeus hurried off down one hall with J.D. and his crew, while Ostin and McKenna returned to the hallway they had just come from.

Welch took the plans over to a desk and laid them out. The paper had a complete diagram of the prison complex, including the apartments outside the main walls. The prison was shaped like a U, with the open end facing west. The north corridor was where the guards quartered, and there were administrative offices and a small arms closet. At the end of the corridor was the mini Starxource plant.

The eastern corridor was for the laboratory and experiments, and for the scientists’ convenience, the southern corridor was lined on both sides with cells for GPs. Cell 25 was located at the opening of the south corridor. The control room was located on the west side of the east corridor. Above it was the main tower, which had glass on all sides like an airplane tower. Next to it, in a separate building, was the radio tower and building.

“I need a pen,” Welch said.

“Here’s a pencil,” Taylor said.

Gervaso, Welch, Ian, and I crouched over the map.

“First we need to blow that dock,” Gervaso said, looking up at Welch. “That’s the priority. Do they have explosives? Dynamite? C4?”

“They wouldn’t need them here. I’m sure they have grenades and some RPGs, something to sink a boat.”

“Where would they be?”

Welch tapped his pen on the map. “The small arms armory is right here, but the heavy weapons cache should be here, in the center of the guard complex.”

“That’s outside the prison,” I said. “Why would they do that?”

“In case there’s a revolt, the prisoners can’t get to the big guns.”

Ostin and McKenna ran back into the room. “What’s next?” Ostin asked.

“We need to free Tara and Torstyn,” Quentin said. “They can help us. Especially Torstyn.”

“Nichelle, Taylor, and I will go with Quentin to free Tara and Torstyn,” I said.

“What about me?” Ian asked.

“We need you up in that tower,” Gervaso said. “With Tanner.” He turned to Welch. “We’ll need radios.”

“Radios should be in the prison armory with the weapons,” Welch said.

“Jack can free and arm the rest of the prisoners,” I said. “Just like he did at the academy. Zeus and Tessa can go with him.”

“What if they have electric collars?” Ostin asked.

“We’ll have to shut them off. That’s work for you.”

“Just like the academy,” Ostin said.

“After I find the explosives, I’ll blow the dock,” Gervaso said. “As soon as I return, we seal off the place. Jack will take his prisoners to guard the walls. Ian is stationed here in the main tower so he can keep everyone apprised.”

“What if they start shelling us first?” Ian asked.

“Are there bunkers?” I asked. “Anything underground?”

“Most Elgen facilities have secret passageways that aren’t on the plans,” Welch said.

“Like the Weekend Express at the Peru Starxource plant,” Ostin said.

Welch looked at him. “Exactly.”

Ian panned the ground. “There’s a tunnel near the entry that runs underground. It’s deep enough to provide shelter.”

Gervaso looked at Ian. “Where does it go?”

“It leads outside the fence to the guard complex.”

Ostin said, “The Elgen don’t know that we know about it, so they’ll probably try to enter in through it and ambush us.”

“Which means we can ambush them while they’re trying to ambush us,” Gervaso said. “I’ll go out the tunnel to blow the dock, then set up a nest at the inner end of the tunnel. How do I get to the tunnel?”

Ostin looked at the map and said, “North corridor. There’s a utility closet next to the arms closet. There’s a trapdoor in the floor.”

Just then Jack and Zeus returned. Gervaso said, "Come over. We don't have much time." He looked at Ian. "We're vastly outnumbered, so communication is crucial. We'll move to wherever the Elgen are so we're always matching them.

"We'll break up into four groups. Michael, after you and Taylor help free the prisoners, you, Ian, Tanner, Nichelle, and Taylor take the main tower. You're squad A, our eyes and ears. Tanner, you do what you do. Just one aircraft could take us out."

Tanner looked at us dully, but said nothing.

Gervaso looked at him. "You good?"

"I'm good," he replied.

Then Gervaso turned to Jack. "You, Zeus, Tessa, Cassy, and Abi are squad B. You take the prisoners, arm them, and set up defenses on the ground inside the outer wall. Jack, you're the general. I want you and the others commanding from up in the towers. I don't want any of you in the line of fire. Just keep the Elgen outside the concrete wall. If they break through, push them back. That's where the real battle is. If we can keep them from breaching the wall, we can win this."

"What about us?" Ostin asked.

"You and McKenna take the command center. You'll have access to all the cameras, communication, sirens, hydraulics, door locks, and electrical power. You can cut power where needed and use the cameras to help communicate to us what's going on."

"Welch and Quentin will take Tara and Torstyn and guard the north gate. After I blow the dock, most of the attacks will probably come from the east. If that changes, Ian will know long before they reach us, and Jack will send his forces to back you up."

Welch said, "If Hatch hasn't executed them yet, there's at least twelve former Elgen guards in the cells. I can take them as well. They're well trained and they know how the Elgen fight."

"Perfect. Just keep those gates closed."

"There's a problem," Quentin said. "I put some of those prisoners in here. They're going to want to kill me, not fight with me."

"Times have changed. They can fight with you or die at the hands of the Elgen."

"Guys, we're missing the point," Ostin said.

We all looked at him. Jack crossed his arms at his chest. "What point?"

Ostin adjusted his glasses. "We came to steal the *Joule* and end the Elgen. What better chance will we get than right now, when the entire Elgen guard has us surrounded? There won't be anyone left to guard the *Joule*. It's ripe for the picking."

"Yes, except they have us *surrounded*," Jack said. "So how are we supposed to get away from the island?"

"Easy," Ostin said. "We can assume that Hatch is expecting J.D. to drop us off and head back to Nike in the *Risky Business*. Therefore, Welch, Quentin, Tara, and Taylor can take J.D. and sail right through the blockade. They'll steal the *Joule* and come back for us."

Jack shook his head. "We're hopelessly outnumbered, and you want to send away some of our best fighters?"

"Well, that's the point, isn't it?" Ostin said. "We're hopelessly outnumbered. We're probably going to lose the battle, but this way we can still win the war."

We were all quiet for a moment. Then I said, "He's right." I looked at Welch. "What do you think?"

"It might work."

"Gervaso?"

He frowned. "Ostin's right. It's our best chance to capture the boat. And we've got a better chance of escaping than fighting."

"No offense," Jack said, looking away from Welch. "But if the former Elgen steal the boat, what guarantee do we have that they'll come back for us?"

Gervaso looked at Quentin. "We don't."

"So do we send one of our team with them?"

"We're all the same team," Welch said. "We can't afford to weaken our forces any more than we already have."

"That sounds suspicious," Jack said. "I need a guarantee."

I thought a moment, then said, "There aren't any guarantees anymore. We just have to trust them."

"We'll come back," Quentin said. "If they don't kill or capture us, we'll return for you."

“If they capture us, they’ll kill us,” Welch said. “But you have my word. If we make it, we’ll come back.”

“The word of an Elgen,” Zeus said.

“Former Elgen,” Welch replied. “Like you.”

Before it could escalate into anything else, I turned to Jack. “So then you’ll have to take the prisoners and cover the north gate as well.”

Jack still looked uncomfortable. “Michael, I’m not good with this.”

“I could go with them,” Cassy said. “Keep them honest.”

“We need her here,” Zeus said.

“If our best shot is the *Joule*, she should be there,” I said. “She could help them. She might be able to stop them from submerging.”

Welch looked at her. “That’s fine. She’s powerful. And Michael’s right, she could help us take the boat.”

“It’s your call,” Gervaso said.

“The *Joule* is most important,” I said, looking at Cassy. “Are you okay with that?”

“I’m okay with whatever you need.”

No one else spoke up, so I said, “Then it’s settled. Welch and Quentin will free Tara, Torstyn, and the guards. Jack will take charge of the prisoners while Welch and company take J.D. back to the *Risky Business* and sail for the *Joule*.”

“I should help them release Torstyn and Tara,” Nichelle said. “We don’t know what Hatch has done to them. Just in case . . .”

“That’s a good idea,” Welch said.

“We’ll go out the tunnel,” Gervaso said to Welch. “I’ll blow the dock while you return to the *Risky Business*. Then I’ll secure the tunnel. If it’s a small enough space, one machine gun could hold it—if we can find a machine gun.”

“There should be one in the armory,” Welch said.

“There is,” Ian said. “I can see two of them.”

“All right,” Gervaso said. “We have a plan and not much time. Let’s go. Weapon up first.”

We hurried to the armory. The door had a combination lock like a bank vault. Ian turned the dial just four times, then turned the handle and it clicked, releasing the door.

“I’ve always loved that power of yours,” Quentin said.

“Me too,” Ian said.

Gervaso pushed open the door and stepped inside. The supply room was about the size of our apartment back home in Idaho. One wall had three rows of rifles, forty or fifty in all, Russian-made AK-47s. Beneath them were stacked boxes of ammo. Against the far wall were two RPG launchers, a dozen submachine guns—Israeli UZIs—and about fifty handguns.

“Look at this,” Gervaso said, crouching down next to the largest of the guns. “They’ve got some M2s—fifty-caliber Browning machine guns. That will stop anything in that tunnel.”

“I’ve found something better,” I said. “A flamethrower.”

“That’s exactly what I need for the tunnel,” Gervaso said.

The opposite wall was a candy shop of destruction—everything a soldier of fortune could dream of. Inside the various cubbies were land mines and rocket-propelled grenades, tear gas, concussion grenades, and smoke bombs.

“This is good,” Gervaso said. “There’s enough here to blow the dock. Ostin and McKenna, grab some radios, then head back to the control room. You’re going to have to start opening the cell doors so we can release the prisoners.”

“After we help suit up,” Ostin said.

“I’ll help you set up the tunnel,” Jack said to Gervaso.

Taylor and I helped Gervaso, Jack, Tessa, and Welch get weapons. All Zeus took was a grenade and a bulletproof vest. Jack took an UZI, two handguns, a grenade belt with six grenades, and an ammo pouch. He grabbed two strings of machine gun ammo and draped them crisscrossing over his chest. He also threw the flamethrower over his back. He looked commando.

Gervaso took the machine gun and as much ammo as he could carry.

Ostin calibrated all the radios, six of them, one for each group, and handed them out. “Testing, testing.”

“They’re working,” I said.

“Remember, we’re on channel seventeen, as in seventeen electrics.”

Gervaso clipped a radio to his belt. "All right. Let's get going. Michael, you guys get up there. They might be getting close." He turned to Ian. "Remember, you're our eyes. Just let us know what's going on. The more information we have, the better."

"I'll do my best."

Gervaso started walking toward the tunnel, then abruptly stopped and turned back. "One more thing. If something happens to me, Michael's in charge."

No one said anything, but Taylor gave me a sympathetic glance. Gervaso took a deep breath, then said, "All right. Good luck, everybody. Semper Fi. We'll see you when this is over."

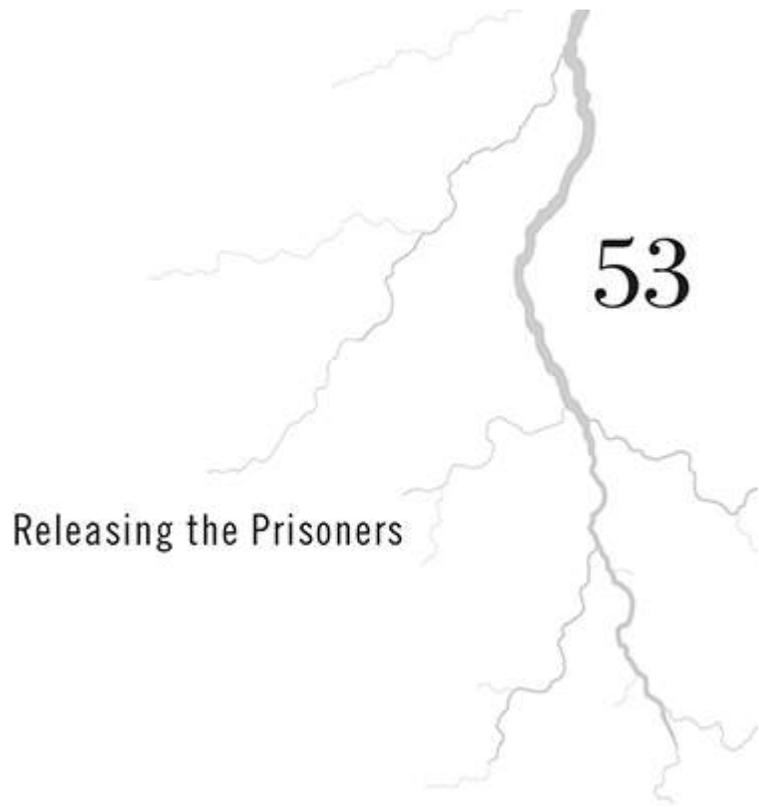
I looked at Gervaso, then suddenly stepped forward and hugged him. "Be safe, man."

"You too. Keep them all safe."

After he was out of sight, Taylor turned to me. "You don't think you're going to see him again."

"Of course I will."

She knew I was lying even without touching me.



“We need to help them release prisoners. Then we’ll join you up top,” I said to Ian and Tanner.

“No worries, man,” Ian said.

They left for the tower while Taylor, Cassy, and I joined up with Welch, Quentin, and Nichelle near the end of the southern corridor. They were just about to enter one of the cells. “Who’s in there?” I asked.

“Torstyn,” Welch said. He lifted his radio. “Command center, you there?”

“Roger,” Ostin said.

“Open cell door 003.”

There was a slight pause, followed by, “Opening cell door 003 and turning off RESAT.”

There was a sudden squeal of air followed by the click of a lock.

“Taylor, Cassy, and I had better stay in the hall for now,” I said. “We don’t want to completely freak him out.”

Quentin nodded. “No worries.” He pushed open the door and walked in. Nichelle and Welch followed him. I looked through the glass panel on the door to watch. Torstyn was lying sideways on his bed, looking away from the door. He was wearing a pink jumpsuit. He rolled over to see who had come for him.

He looked ragged, thinner and weaker. Most of all he looked confused. “Quentin? Welch?”

Quentin walked up to the bed. “It’s me, man.”

“And me,” Welch added.

“What are you doing here?” Torstyn asked. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve come to rescue you.”

His expression changed when he saw Nichelle. “What’s she doing here?”

“Calm down, microwave,” Nichelle said. “We’re on the same side. Who do you think freed your bro here?”

“She’s telling the truth,” Quentin said. “Michael Vey and the Electroclan freed us. But we’re going to have to fight our way out of here.”

“Vey?”

Taylor, Cassy, and I stepped into the room. “Yeah, us.”

Torstyn just stared at us for a moment. “Tara?”

“No. I’m Taylor.”

“We’re on the same side now?”

“We’re all against Hatch,” I said. “That puts us on the same side.”

“I know you’re pretty weak,” Welch said. “But we don’t have a lot of time. Hatch and the guards are on their way. We have a boat. We’re going to sneak out the back.”

“All of us?”

“No,” I said. “Just you guys. We’re going to try to hold this prison.”

Quentin helped Torstyn up.

“You freed Tara?” Torstyn asked.

“That’s where we’re going next,” Welch said.

We walked out of the cell. Taylor looked inside the slit of the door two cells down. “There’s my sister.”

I lifted my radio. There was ambient noise and talking from Jack and Zeus, who were gathering up the GPs.

“Ostin, this is Michael. Do you read me?”

“Copy, Michael.”

“Open cell 005. And turn off the RESAT.”

“On it.”

The door clicked. Quentin pushed the door open, and he, Torstyn, and Nichelle stepped inside. I stood with Welch and Taylor in the doorway.

Tara was also dressed in a pink jumpsuit. She looked like she had aged ten years. “Q?”

“I’m so sorry,” Quentin said. He walked over and hugged her. “I never should have dragged you into this.”

Tara looked afraid and confused. “Where’s Hatch? Is he dead?”

“No. The Elgen are on their way. We’re going to fight them.”

“Us?” She lay back down. “We can’t beat them. No one can stop Hatch.”

“We can,” I said, stepping forward. “I’ve beaten him. I’ll do it again.”

“Vey?”

“And I’m here,” Taylor said.

Tara stared at her twin. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to save you.”

“But . . . I’m your enemy.”

“You’re my sister. Let me help you.” Tara looked at her twin in disbelief, then fell into Taylor’s arms and wept.



“You guys need to get out of here fast,” I said.

“Do you have any food?” Tara asked.

“Yeah, we’re starving,” Torstyn said.

“I’ll take them to get something to eat,” Cassy said.

“I’ll go with you,” Nichelle said.

“Michael,” Welch said. “Come with me to free the guards. They should see me first.”

We passed a room where Abigail was alone arranging tables in long rows.

“What’s she doing?” Quentin asked.

“Turning it into a hospital,” I said.

Welch, Quentin, and I freed up nine Elgen guards who had run afoul of Hatch. Welch thought there were more. There were, but they had already been executed. Not surprisingly, the remaining guards wanted revenge on Hatch.

“Listen up,” Welch said. “Hatch and your former brotherhood are descending on this island. They will not be taking prisoners. Neither will we. Fight as if your life depended upon it, because it does.”

We led the men down to the supply closet and armed them. The guards found Elgen uniforms and put them on, though Welch handed out a roll of security tape for them to wrap around their arms to keep from getting accidentally shot by the other prisoners.

As we were finishing up, Jack, Tessa, and Zeus returned.

“The tunnel is armed,” Jack said. “Gervaso has gone out to blow the dock.”

“Alone?”

“He said we couldn’t wait any longer.” Jack looked at the guards. “Who are they?”

“These are all the former Elgen guards,” Welch said. “Three of them were ZCs. They are leaders. They’re now your soldiers. They’re under your command.”

Jack looked them over. “Fall in, soldiers.”

The men lined up against the wall.

Jack looked natural commanding. “Men, we’re under attack. We’ve got to arm and manage two hundred prisoners. Each of you will take a squad of twenty prisoners. It is your responsibility to get them armed and guard the section I give you. Understand?”

The men shouted, “Yes, sir!”

“I told you they were well trained,” Welch said. “Now we’ve got to go. Let’s get the boat captain.” He looked at Torstyn and Tara, who were still wearing their pink outfits. Their hands were filled with food. “Change your clothes; then eat,” he said. “We’re going to get the captain. We’re leaving the second I return.”

“Taylor and I will go and start freeing prisoners,” I said to Jack. “We’ll send them back to you.” I lifted my radio. “Ostin, we’re going to start letting the prisoners out. Get ready.”

“Roger.”

Taylor and I ran down to the south cells. The door was locked. “Ostin, open the main door to the south cells.”

“Roger that.”

“Who’s Roger?” Taylor asked.

“It’s just a radio thing,” I said. I pushed open the door and walked into a dim, long, narrow hallway. There were about twenty doors on each side, each filled with GPs in various states of mental trauma. I walked up to the first door and looked in through its acrylic slot window. I counted five Tuvaluan men, all with electric collars and dressed in orange jumpsuits. They must have heard us coming, as they were huddled at the back of the room. “Open S-001.”

“Opening S-001.” The door unlocked. “Collars off.”

I opened the door. The GPs didn’t move.

“Déjà vu,” I said. “Just like the academy.” I looked at the men. “You can speak.”

No one did.

“Maybe they don’t speak English,” Taylor said.

“I speak English,” one of them said with a British accent.

“Good. We are here to free you. But we have to fight against the Elgen. Will you help?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your name?”

“I am Enele Saluni, grandson of the prime minister.”

“After we overthrow the Elgen, your grandfather will be free to rule again,” I said. “But right now the Elgen are coming and we need your men to fight.”

“The Elgen are coming here?”

“All of them. To destroy the prison.”

“Do we have weapons?”

“For everyone,” I said.

Enele turned and spoke in Tuvaluan, and the men immediately stood at attention.

“We will help,” Enele said.

“We’ve got to let everyone out,” I said. “We’ll need everyone.”

We walked out, then opened the first four doors on the south side of the hall, releasing twenty prisoners. I led them back to Jack, leaving Taylor with the radio and Enele. When I returned to the armory, Welch was standing there with J.D., another crew member, Quentin, Tara, Torstyn, and Cassy.

“Everyone ready?” I asked.

“Where are we going?” J.D. asked defiantly. He must have figured out that he had nothing to lose, as he’d already lost his previous humility.

“There’s been a change of plans,” Welch said. “You’re going to sail back to Nike just as you told Hatch you would.”

J.D. scowled. “And if I refuse?”

Welch’s eyes narrowed. “Imagine what it would feel like to have your hand in a microwave oven for sixty seconds. Torstyn can show you how that feels. And then he will melt your eyes, your tongue, then your brain, in that order. Do you understand?”

J.D. swallowed. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Torstyn, these are Hatch’s friends and collaborators. If they make one wrong move, melt them. Slowly.”

“Just give the word,” Torstyn said, staring hatefully at J.D.

“Let’s go.” Welch lifted his radio. “Come in, Gervaso.”

“Gervaso, copy.”

“This is Welch. We’re headed down the tunnel. Just didn’t want you to shoot us.”

“I’m headed out now for the dock. Good luck.”

“Roger,” Welch said into his radio. Then he turned to his group and said, “Let’s go.”

I looked at Cassy. “Good luck.”

“I’ll make sure they come back, if I have to drive the boat myself,” she said.

As we were parting, our radios squelched. “This is Ian. We’ve got small rafts landing on the west side of the island. Three of them. Here they come.”

“Looks like some of our guests arrived early,” Welch said. “Let’s get this party started.” As the others began climbing down the ladder to the tunnel, Welch turned to me. “If we don’t come back, it’s because we failed or are dead. You can trust us.”

“I do,” I said. “Good luck.”

“Just hold out.” He turned and followed the rest of his group down the tunnel. Jack and his soldiers were standing quietly, sizing up the

GPs.

“That’s all there is?” one of the guards asked.

“It’s just the first group,” I said. “We think there’s about two hundred. Not all of them speak English. Not all of them are fit to fight.”

Jack turned to the GPs and asked, “Who speaks English?”

Three of the men raised their hands.

“Get up here,” he said to the biggest. “You’re second-in-command of the squad.”

There was at least one English speaker for every ten natives, which was all we needed. While Taylor and I were releasing prisoners, Jack had established a chain of command with the guards and gone over the map of the installation, establishing their battle stations. He had also distributed radios to each Squad Captain.

With the guidance of a former Elgen Zone Captain, Jack created a plan to hold the outer wall.

The group of prisoners I had just brought were assigned a leader, and the man created the first squad, arming his men and leading them out to defend the west wall, where the Elgen had started landing.

By the time I returned to the south corridor, Taylor and Enele had released nearly a hundred prisoners.

“We better stop for now,” I said to Enele, a little nervous of so many unstable men roaming free. “We’ll need a little time to assign them to squads.”

“Do not worry,” Enele said. “They will follow directions.”

I led the men back to the armory, where Jack and the guards divided them up while Taylor and Enele freed the rest. There were more prisoners than we expected, two hundred and thirty-two in all, so Jack created an extra squad, with Enele in charge.

* * *

After all the men had been sent out in squads, Taylor and I climbed the stairs four stories to the central watchtower. As we entered the observation room, we saw Tanner sitting cross-legged on one of the shelves, looking out through binoculars. He was wet, and there was a

pool of water beneath him. He had opened a window and rain was blowing in, drenching him.

He's lost it, I thought.

Nichelle was on the west side of the tower, and Ian was on the east side talking into his radio. He didn't need binoculars. It didn't even matter what side he sat on.

He turned toward us. "Guys, this rock is starting to crawl. I'm having trouble keeping track of them all. The first major wave is about to hit the west shore. Did you get my message about the early rafts?"

"Yes, we heard it. Did you warn Gervaso?"

"I don't know if he heard me. He didn't answer."

"If he saw them, he turned his radio off so he wouldn't give himself away."

Tanner spun around on the counter. "Hey, kidlings. There are more binoculars over there on that shelf. These things rock."

"Thanks," Taylor said warily.

We each took a pair. Then I walked over to Nichelle. "How are you?"

"You know, the sea scares me. I didn't want to tell you that on the boat. Thought it might worry you. But I think the devil rides the waves."

I looked out and saw the first flotilla of Elgen boats approaching the island.

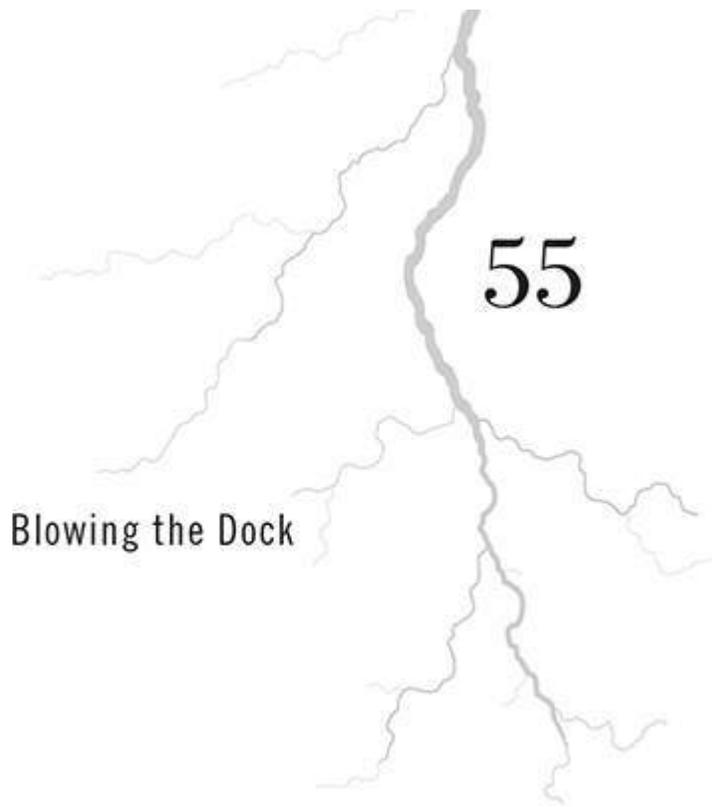
"He definitely is today," I said. "How's Tanner?"

She just shook her head.

Just then, over the radio came, "Ian, this is Gervaso. Do you read me?"



PART TEN



After Gervaso had established his machine gun nest at the inside neck of the tunnel, he grabbed the backpack he'd filled with explosives and, carrying just a Beretta handgun, crawled out the outer end of the tunnel. Just as he was about to surface, his radio squawked.

"Come in, Gervaso."

"Gervaso, copy."

"This is Welch. We're headed down the tunnel. Just didn't want you to shoot us."

"I'm headed out now for the dock," Gervaso said. "Good luck."

"Roger."

Gervaso turned off his radio and climbed out of the tunnel. The rain was pouring down, and the ocean looked pitted from a million raindrops.

He didn't see anyone, so he crossed the road to a row of charred bushes and began crawling toward the dock. When he got there, he

waded into the water beneath the dock, carrying his backpack. To blow the dock he would have to link the explosives together, connecting them close enough to each other so they would trip each other, resulting in complete annihilation.

Because of the turbulence of the sea, the waves kept slamming him into the underside of the dock, and it took Gervaso nearly twenty minutes to set the explosives, ten minutes longer than he had planned. It made him nervous. He suspected that the Elgen would be landing soon—if they hadn't already.

After he finished setting the detonator, he again looked around to make sure he was alone, tossed his backpack into the sea, and then climbed to the top of the dock. He stopped to look out toward the sea. Through the rain and darkness he could see the *Faraday* about eight hundred yards out. That meant serious trouble. The *Faraday* was capable of transporting more than thirty-five hundred soldiers. If they all were allowed to dock, men would pour out faster than they could handle. The prison would be overrun.

He looked around. The *Risky Business* was still where Welch had left it. He wondered where Welch was. He lifted his radio and turned it back on. "Ian, this is Gervaso. Come in."

"This is Ian."

"We've got Elgen to the north in the *Faraday*. They're going to try to dock."

"I can see it. Does the dock still stand?"

"I'm about to blow it. Did Welch get out?"

"They're out of the tunnel. He shouldn't be far from you now."

"Roger. Over."

"Over," Ian said.

Gervaso returned the radio to his belt. He knelt down on the dock and hung over to check his wiring once more, then stood. As he turned to go, he saw the shadows of Welch and his team creeping beneath the cover of the wall.

Finally, he thought. Gervaso raised his hand and shouted in a muted yell, "Good luck."

The shadows stopped. Then a gun opened fire, hitting Gervaso in the chest and knocking him back onto the dock.

Bleeding, Gervaso slowly pulled himself around to see who had fired on him. The men he'd mistaken for Welch's group were Elgen guards. They walked toward him, their guns pointing at him.

"Expecting someone else?" a guard asked.

Gervaso feebly lifted his handgun but was hit two more times from Elgen bullets as the squad stepped up onto the dock. Gervaso gasped for breath as he reached into his pocket and rolled over to his stomach, bracing for the next round.

"Finish him," the captain said to one of his men.

The front guard, barely older than twenty, walked on the blood-soaked dock until he was next to Gervaso. He pointed his gun at the back of Gervaso's head. "Good-bye, man."

Gervaso rolled over to look the young guard in the eyes. In his hand Gervaso held a grenade, its pin already pulled. "Yeah, good-bye."

"Hit the deck!" the guard shouted, but it was too late. The grenade blew, igniting the chain of explosives. The entire dock exploded in a blinding flash. When the smoke cleared, the dock, the Elgen, and Gervaso were gone.



PART ELEVEN



“Gervaso!” Ian shouted.

I turned around. Ian was paralyzed.

“What happened?”

His voice was strained. “The Elgen got him.”

“What do you mean, ‘got him’?”

“They . . . got him.”

“We’ve got to rescue him,” I said.

Ian just looked at me, his eyes welling up with tears. “He blew the dock. He’s gone.”

For a moment I couldn’t speak. Then I leaned over, resting my hands on my knees. “No!” Tears began to fill my eyes, then fall, spattering on the already wet floor. “No.”

“I’m sorry, Michael.” Taylor put her hand on my back. After a minute she said, “You’re in charge now.”

I stood back up. I caught my breath, then lifted the radio. In the strongest voice I could muster I said, "Everyone, this is Michael. Gervaso is gone, but he blew the dock. He gave his life for us. Remember that. Don't let him die in vain."

I could hear Jack scream out over a distant radio. The sound of it made me feel even sicker. Jack had already lost Wade, now Gervaso. Gervaso was his hero. His mentor. A second father. A better father than his real one.

I radioed Jack directly. "I'm sorry, man."

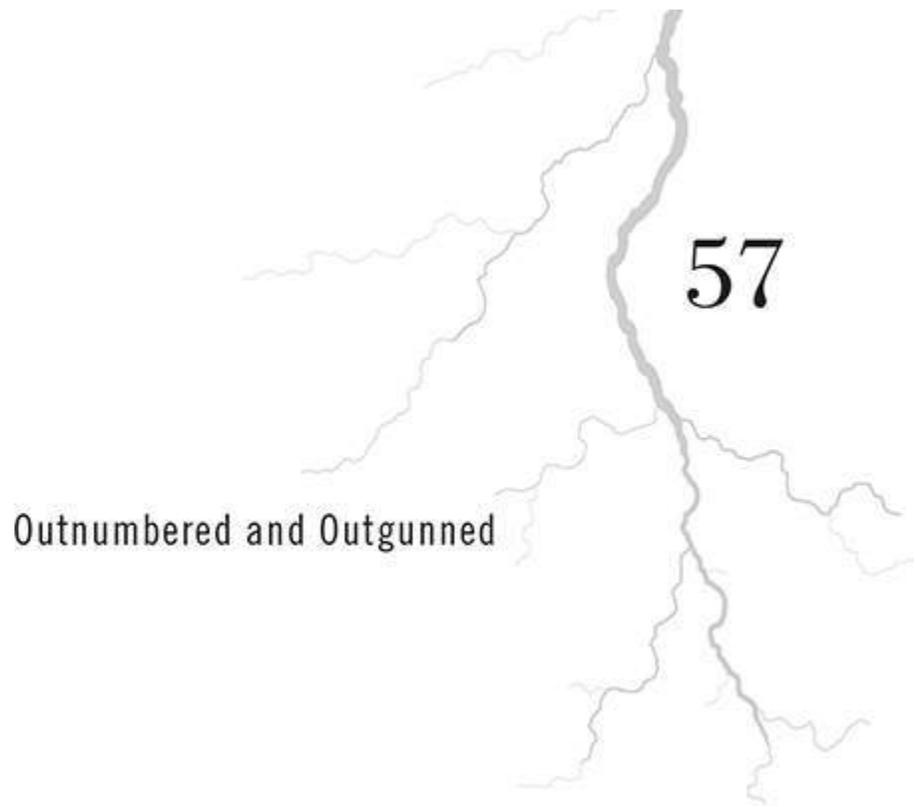
"I knew I shouldn't have left him," he said. "I'm going to take them apart myself."

"I know," I said. "Just keep it together. We've got a long night ahead of us."

The radio snapped. "This is Ostin. We're going to need someone to take the tunnel. Gervaso has the gun nest set up but it's wide open. I'm detecting movement near its mouth."

"I'll take the tunnel," Zeus said.

"Roger that," I said. "Zeus has the tunnel. Don't let anyone in!"



The *Faraday* docked as close as it could get to the island without hitting reef, about two hundred yards out to sea. I wished I had something to blow it up with. The *Tesla*, the Elgen's landing tender, had begun transporting troops to the reef, dropping them in the water, then returning for more.

More guards came from the west, arriving on rafts and smaller boats. Within a half hour there were hundreds of troops surrounding the compound.

"They just keep coming," Taylor said. "Like ants at a picnic."

Suddenly Ian shouted, "We've got two helicopters inbound. They've got missiles."

"Where?" Tanner asked.

"Three o'clock."

Tanner lifted his binoculars. "There they are."

"How far out can you bring them down?" I asked.

“Now,” he said. He reached out his hand.

“Lead helicopter is down,” Ian said.

“I’ll get the next.”

“You got it,” Ian said. A moment later he shouted, “Missile was launched!”

A fiery streak hit the outer wall of the compound, exploding loudly and throwing concrete and twisting rebar. When the smoke cleared, there was a hole in the wall the size of a truck.

“There’s a break in the west wall!” I shouted over the radio.

“We see it!” Jack shouted. “Concentrate fire at the hole. No one gets in.”

Through the haze I could see fire spewing through the hole from the mouths of Elgen machine gun barrels, answered by our own troops. Then Elgen guards began running in through the hole.

Dozens fell before Jack’s forces, but the Elgen kept pouring into the break. Even though the prisoners had stopped hundreds, they were soon overwhelmed, outnumbered, and outgunned. Jack’s men were forced to fall back behind the chain-link fences, which separated them from the guards but not their bullets.

Then the Elgen turned their guns on the towers. They couldn’t hit me, as I could repel everything they had, but I was concerned for the others.

“Everyone down!” I shouted. “I don’t want to deflect something into you.”

The number of Elgen in the yard just continued to grow. Our tower sounded like it was being chipped apart piece by piece, splinters and plaster and dust clouding the air.

I lifted the radio. “Jack, fall back!” I shouted. “Get your men into the buildings. The Elgen have taken the grounds.” I looked out over the flow of Elgen guards. “There’s nothing we can do to stop them.”

“They’re going to set explosives on the prison walls,” Ian said.

“We’re so dead,” Tanner said.

“Shut up!” I shouted. “Stop saying that!”



PART TWELVE



From the center of our fortress, Ostin and McKenna watched the attack unfold around the compound on a panel of screens. If it wasn't for the occasional sound of explosions rattling the room's walls, it would have seemed more like a movie than an actual battle.

"They've breeched the wall," Ostin said calmly. "Everyone's falling back."

McKenna looked at him. "What do we do?"

"In the movies this is when the cavalry rides in."

"It's not the movies. And we don't have a cavalry."

The monitors showed guards flooding into the complex by the tens, then hundreds. The prisoners who hadn't made it behind the chain-link fence were shot down. The grounds were littered with bodies. Jack had already lost a third of his forces.

Ostin looked at the screens for a moment, then over at the central control panel. "Battery power at ninety-seven percent, estimated

battery life thirty-six hours. That should be enough." He examined the panel again, then said, "I have an idea." He looked at McKenna. "Maybe there is a cavalry."



PART THIRTEEN



The dark grounds below us were chaos. The screaming of fallen prisoners echoed amid the hellish landscape of rain, smoke, and fire. The Elgen forces flowed in like demon shadows, darkening a courtyard lit only by gunfire or grenades. Occasionally, lightning would strike, illuminating the grounds for a second, like a strobe, capturing the dying and killing in frozen, violent stances. That's when we could see just how many there were of them. It seemed like thousands.

"They're setting explosives on the outer fence," Ian said.

"That's the last thing keeping them from the building," I said. "Once they reach the building, it's over."

"We could have used Cassy," Taylor said.

"Jack!" I shouted. "Hit those guys on the south perimeter. They've got explosives."

"Got them."

Taylor said, "Michael, what's going on over there?"

At the end of the north corridor, beneath the flume of the Starxource plant, a door opened, revealing an intense red glow that seemed to be growing brighter. Suddenly a steaming flow burst from the door. It was glowing orangish-red, like a stream of lava spewed from a volcano.

"What the crap is that?" Ian said.

It was something I had seen before.

"It's genius," I said. "Ostin is a freaking genius." Then the sound caught up to us, a loud screech like the painful squeal of a train's brakes. "It's rats. Ostin must have released them from the Starxource plant."

Even in the mini Starxource bowl there were tens of thousands of the hungry, electric animals. The ravenous rats swept across the yard in a powerful, glowing surge, running at the guards, drawn to them by the smell of death and meat.

The Elgen in front were the first to fall, vainly firing their guns into the mass, which was like shooting arrows to stop a river.

The swarm of rats broke against the men like a wave hitting the shore, covering and devouring them, pouring over each other, as the guards were stripped of their flesh.

The guards at the rear ran to escape the onslaught, some successfully, some not.

It took less than three minutes for the guards to evacuate the complex. At least those who could. Those who didn't make it out were devoured.

The river of glowing fur continued out the breaches in the wall, chasing the guards outside. The sounds of screams and machine guns echoed in the distance.

I lifted my radio. "Ostin, you're a freaking genius."

"Roger that," he said. "Tell me something I don't know."

"I can't. There's nothing you don't know."

"Well, we emptied the yard for a moment."

"More than just a moment," I said.

"It's a reprieve," he said. "Not a victory."

“What do you mean?” I noticed that the glow below us had begun to dull. I looked through my binoculars. The rats were falling to their sides, steaming and twitching until the entire ground was a gray, writhing carpet of wet, smoldering fur.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“It’s the rain,” Ostin said. “Water kills them.”

I looked around. “Jack, let’s get the prisoners back out there and collect the Elgen weapons. Let’s get their machine guns on the breaches. They’ll be back.”

“Sooner than you think,” Ian said.

Just then a loud explosion rocked our perch. At first I thought lightning had struck the grounds, because smoke was rising from below us, but when I looked out toward the fence, I saw a large gap wide enough to drive a tank through. Then another blast hit.

“It’s mortar fire,” Ian said. “They’re shelling us.”

Another projectile hit the tower to our east and blew it apart, leaving just a few bricks and mangled rebar. Then a second tower was hit.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Taylor said. “They’re aiming for the towers.”

“Too late!” Ian shouted. “Incoming!”

A mortar round broke through the glass of our tower. I reached out to deflect it just as it blew. The shrapnel scattered away from me, covering the western wall. The explosion rang in my ears as smoke filled the room.

After a moment Taylor coughed, then said, “You saved us.”

I rolled over to my side, trying to catch my breath as the smoke cleared.

“Oh no,” Nichelle said. “Tanner?”

I sat up. Through the smoke I could see Tanner lying on top of a desk against the west wall. His arm was dangling over the side, and I could see blood dripping from his fingers.

“Tanner!” I shouted.

All of us ran to his side. He was mostly covered in the chalky plaster of the wall, except where the red of his blood had seeped through and stained his clothes and the dust crimson. There were

holes all over his body. Shrapnel. I looked over at Ian, who looked horror-struck. He lowered his head as he shook it.

Somehow Tanner was still conscious.

I touched his shoulder, one of the few places not soaked with blood. "I'm so sorry."

Tanner grimaced in pain, then said softly, "You were right, man . . ." His chin quivered, and a thin stream of blood fell down from the corner of his mouth. "I tried. I just couldn't do it. All those people I killed."

"It wasn't your fault," I said. "It was never your fault. Hatch made you do it."

"Maybe . . . God will see it that way." He looked into my eyes. Then his gaze froze and his hand went limp.

"No," I said. "Tanner, I'm sorry."

Taylor started crying.

"I killed him," I said.

Nichelle put her hand on my arm. "No, you didn't. The Elgen did."

I stood there, the world spinning around me. I had already lost two friends. No matter the outcome, I had already lost. After a minute Ian said, "Come on, Michael. We've got to get out of here."

I just knelt down next to Tanner's body. "I'm so sorry."

Taylor put her arm around me. "Please, Michael. Ian's right. We've got to go or we'll all die."

I looked back up. Ian and Nichelle were looking at me and there was fear on their faces.

"C'mon," Taylor said, gently pulling me. "We've got to go."

I forced myself to my feet. We took the stairs back down into the prison, barring the door behind us. At the end of the hallway we could see a group of GPs crowded inside. The lights inside the building were flickering.

I was having trouble concentrating. "Ian, what's going on?"

"The guards have taken the grounds again. There're more of them. They just keep coming."

Just then Tessa's voice came over the radio. "Michael, they broke through the north gate. We can't hold them. We're falling back inside."

“The second fence is down,” Ian said.

“Everyone into the prison,” I said.

“It’s going to be hand-to-hand combat,” Ian said.

I looked at him. “No, it’s not. They’re going to bury us alive.”

Just then the ground beneath us shook.

“It came from over there,” Ian said. “It’s the tunnel.”

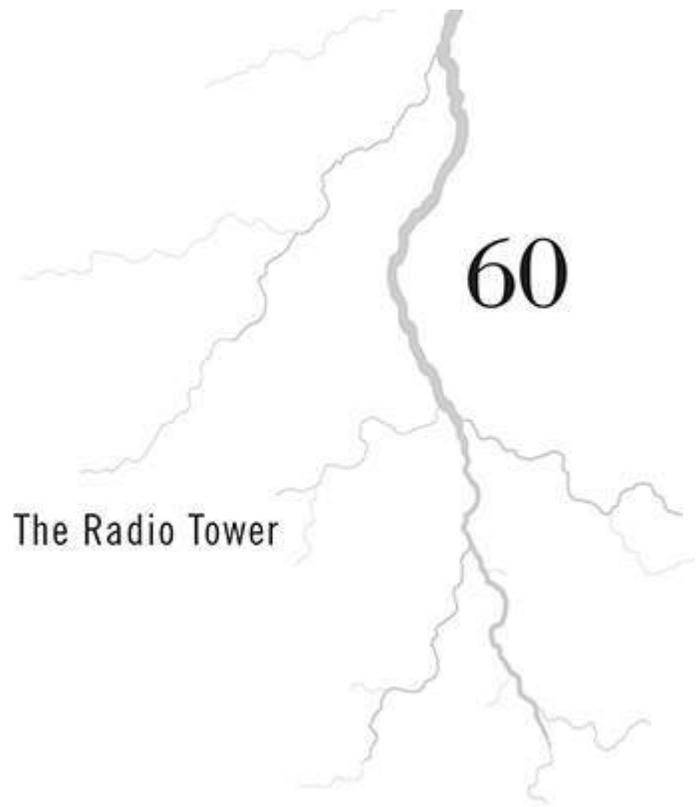
“Zeus!” I lifted my radio. “Zeus? Are you there? Zeus, what happened?”

Nothing.

“Zeus!”

There was a burst of static, then, “I’m here. I couldn’t hold them anymore so I blew the outer tunnel. I’m coming up.”

I breathed out in relief. “Meet us in the east corridor. Ostin, Jack, everyone, meet in the east corridor. Now!” A horrid little voice said to me, *We’ll die together in the east corridor.*



The prison's east corridor was crowded and full of panic. The few GPs who had survived were terrified or unconscious. Most were injured, some dying. Abigail was walking around the cafeteria caring for the wounded, comforting as many as she could. She had run a wire between a dozen injured men and was holding the end of it, taking away their pain. She was trembling and pale.

"Abi!" Taylor shouted. "Come with us!"

Just then there was an explosion and the door at the end of the south corridor blew across the hall. Almost immediately dozens of guards started running in.

"They're inside," Taylor said.

At that moment something inside me cracked, and rage as hot as lightning pulsed through my body. I felt insane. My Tourette's went crazy and I started twitching uncontrollably.

The guards immediately set their guns and began firing at us, at me, the glowing target, but I was so electric that nothing could hit me. Nothing could hit any of us. Then I shouted, "Stop shooting at us!" I reached out at them and pulsed with all my anger.

The shockwave I emitted rattled the walls and broke against them like an explosion, evaporating everything that had stood in the path.

"Michael!" Taylor gasped.

I looked down at my hand. It was flashing between flesh and electricity. At moments I could see through it. I was pure electricity.

"What's happening to you?" Taylor asked.

My body was now glowing brighter than a lightbulb. "I don't know. But don't touch me."

"Michael," Ian said. "They just took the south and north wings. We need to evacuate."

"To where?" Taylor said. "There's no place else to go."

I looked around. There was only one place left, the radio room next to where the radio mast was mounted.

"Outside," I said. "Where's the rest of the clan?" I lifted my radio. "Everyone hurry!"

Just then Ostin and McKenna ran up, followed by Tessa and Zeus, who was covered in dirt. Then Jack came. He was covered with dirt, and his shirt was torn and bloody where a bullet had grazed him.

"Everyone outside," I said. "To the radio building."

Fortunately, the walk to the radio building and tower was covered by a fiberglass canopy, which provided shelter for Zeus.

"What are we going to do out here?" Taylor asked.

"I just need to think," I said. "Away from the chaos."

"We shouldn't be by this mast," Ostin said. "If lightning strikes, it could kill us."

"As opposed to the Elgen?" Jack said.

"Lightning never strikes the same place twice," Taylor said. "I already saw the tower get hit."

"That's a myth," Ostin said. "The Empire State Building was once hit forty-eight times in less than a half hour."

"Michael, what's going on with you?" Jack asked. "You're, like . . . electric."

“I know.” I looked up at the tower. “Ostin, are you serious about this tower getting struck by lightning?”

“As a heart attack, man. We need to move.”

“I’d rather be electrocuted than shot,” Ian said.

“Give me odds,” I said. “What are the odds this will be struck again?”

“Too good,” Ostin said. “That thing’s five hundred meters. We’ve got to get away from here.”

“Give me odds.”

“I can’t,” Ostin said. “There are too many variables.”

“For once in your life just guess!”

“Eighty-two point four percent!” he shouted in frustration.

“Good enough,” I said. “Zeus!”

“Yes, sir.”

“When you blew the tunnel, did you blow the whole thing?”

“No. Just the end so they couldn’t get in.”

“How many can fit in there?”

He looked at me quizzically. “I don’t know. Maybe fifty. Why?”

“That’s where you’re taking everyone.” I opened the west door of the radio building and started walking toward the base of the tower.

“What do you mean?” Jack asked.

“Michael, what are you doing?” Taylor said, coming after me.

I turned and looked at her. I wanted to kiss her, but I knew I couldn’t do it without hurting her. I was way too electric. “Just make sure everyone’s down in the tunnel by the time I reach the top.”

“The top of what?” She looked at the tower, then back at me, panic in her eyes. “The tower?”

“I love you. Remember that. I’ll always love you.” I turned back and walked toward the center of the tower, where a ladder climbed the latticework to the top.

“You promised you would never leave me!” she shouted after me.

“I know,” I said. “If it was my choice, I wouldn’t. But it’s not anymore.”

“Michael, what are you doing?” Ostin said, coming out of the building. “Get away from the tower.”

“I know what I need to do. I just need more electricity.”

He looked at the sky, then back at me. "Michael, that's a billion volts. It will probably kill you."

"We're already dead, man."

Taylor shouted frantically, "Jack, stop him! Please!"

Jack ran to me. "Michael, don't do this."

"I don't have a choice."

"There's always a choice. I won't let you."

"You don't have a choice either. You can't stop me."

"Yes, I can." He grabbed me by the arm. Just touching me shocked him. His arm shook, but he didn't let go.

I looked at him calmly. "You need to let go, Jack."

"You're not climbing that thing, man. Look how bright you are. You're like a beacon. The Elgen will shoot you off before you reach the top."

"No, they can't touch me. It's our only chance. Now let go."

"I won't do it, buddy. I can't lose you. You're all I have left. You're my friend." His eyes welled up with tears. "You're my best friend."

I looked Jack in the eyes. "You once said you'd take a bullet for me. You need to let me do the same. That's what I'm doing." Limiting myself as much as possible, I pulsed. I was so electric that my mildest was enough to throw Jack back, unconscious. I pointed to Zeus. "I'm counting on you, Zeus. Get everyone you can into the tunnel."

I turned back, grabbed on to the ladder, and began climbing.



PART FOURTEEN



“What is that?” Hatch shouted, staring through his binoculars from the *Faraday*. “What’s that climbing the radio mast? That light?”

One of the officers lifted his own binoculars. “It’s not a light. It’s a person.” He turned to Hatch. “I think it’s Vey.”

“Why would he climb the tower?”

“He must be trying to escape.”

“To what?” Hatch said. “He’s either an idiot or a coward. Shoot him down. I want every gun on him. I want the tower brought down if you have to, just bring him down. I want Vey’s body. I want my feast. I will have my feast.”



PART FIFTEEN



I hadn't considered whether or not I had the strength to make the climb, only that I needed to do it. My clothes were drenched and I was winded just a few hundred feet up, maybe just 10 percent of the way to the top. Usually when you climb a ladder, you're on an incline, leaning inward. A vertical climb is much more difficult, as you are moving straight up. It feels as if you're being pulled backward.

Within fifteen minutes my friends, who were still huddled around the base of the tower, looked like miniatures—like the plastic army men I used to play with when I was a child.

As I climbed higher, I could feel the change in the atmosphere. The air seemed more electric—more charged—and my body tingled with the added power. My clothes began to burn.

It wasn't hard to tell when the Elgen army had spotted me. I could see the fire from gun barrels pointed at me, popping like thousands of camera flashes at an NBA play-off. The bullets began whizzing by me

like angry wasps. Then bigger things, projectiles, began flying toward me. I didn't mind that they were shooting at me. I hoped they would. It meant they weren't shooting at my friends, and I was so electric that I easily repelled everything the Elgen sent my way. At this point I think I could have repelled an airplane.

My biggest concern was that they might take out the tower. When I was halfway up, one of the shells exploded next to the tower about fifty feet below me, and the entire tower shook. My feet slipped, and for a moment I hung seven hundred feet up by just my hands. Had I not magnetized, I probably would have fallen. I wondered if they would cut the guy wires. I wondered if they would be willing to bring this whole tower down just to get to me. *Of course they would.*

It took me more than a half hour to reach the top of the mast. Twenty feet before the top was a horizontal beam that hung out about thirty feet in each direction.

At the very top of the mast a red light flashed. I put my hand on the plastic shell of the light, pulsed, and blew it out, not that it helped my situation any, as I was now glowing brighter than the light, but the thing annoyed me.

Lightning flashed in a cloud a few miles off, and the accompanying thunder was louder than I had ever heard it before.

I leaned heavily against the tower's rungs, breathless and dripping with sweat and rain. I was mildly afraid of heights—most people are, I guess, but I was really high up and hanging on to thin wet bars by very little. People have BASE jumped from lower heights.

That's when I realized that, in the unlikely event that I somehow survived a lightning strike, I would never be able to hold on to the tower, and I would fall to my death. As I looked up at the churning, groaning sky, I hooked my arm over the highest rung, then undid my belt. Not only did my mother always buy belts bigger than I needed, since I was still growing, but I had lost weight over the last few months, so the extra length of the belt wrapped halfway around my waist. Taylor had once threatened to cut it in half. I had at least ten inches to work with.

I ran my belt over the rung, then buckled it back on so it would hold me, the same way the utility guys fixing power lines did back in

Idaho. I noticed things like that. As a child, I was always looking for someone else who might be electric too.

That high up I could see the entire island. I could see all the way to one of the other islands. If I was Ian, I probably could have seen Fiji. There were more Elgen than I imagined. Thousands and thousands. Even as the prison fell, more were coming from boats, more were marching to finish us off. I now understood that we had never really had a chance.

Dozens of Elgen boats surrounded the entire island. I wondered where the *Risky Business* was. I wondered if they'd made it through. I wouldn't put it past Hatch to just kill J.D. and keep the million-dollar bounty he'd put on Welch. Maybe I should have just electrocuted J.D. back on the boat.

I looked straight down below me. My friends were gone. All of them. I felt relieved and sad at the same time. I was truly alone.

It was at that moment that I realized that I would never see any of them again. My eyes welled up, and my tears mingled with the driving rain that stung my face. Peculiar thoughts crossed my mind. Was I enough? Had I been the man I should have been? I wished that I hadn't caused my mother all the pain I did. I hoped she wouldn't miss me too much. I wondered what would happen to her.

Just then a bullet struck an iron rung below me. It rang like a bell, awakening me from my thoughts. I thought it was strange that it didn't concern me. I suppose accepting your death is liberating that way. All I thought was, *That was a good shot, dude. You almost got me.*

I've heard it said that your life flashes before you before you die. I don't know if that's true, I don't know whether this counts or not, but memories suddenly began flooding into my mind.

I remembered my mother and me eating at PizzaMax.

I remembered the first time Taylor invited me over to her house and gave me awful lemonade, and learning, for the first time in my life, that I wasn't really alone.

I remembered standing on Jack's doorstep asking him to drive me to California and the look on his face.

I remembered the party when I knocked Corky over.

I remembered the time at the academy when Zeus had blown a bullet out of the air that Hatch had fired at me. That was still pretty cool.

I remembered Taylor's dream about the crocodiles and lightning and the island of glass. I was sorry that I would never completely understand what it meant.

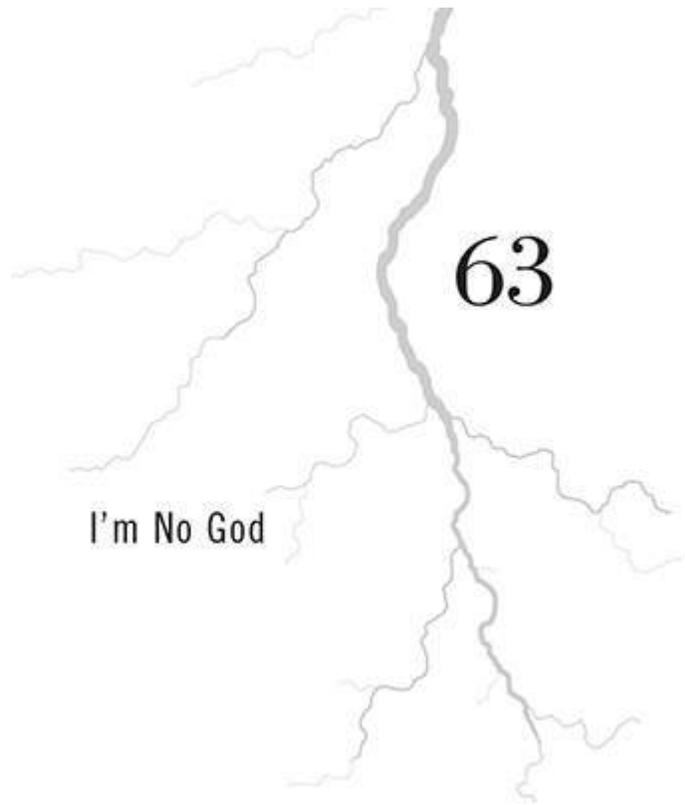
I remembered hundreds of hours with Ostin, video games and Shark Week, wasted time that now seemed anything but wasted. How grateful I felt to have him in my life. I regretted dragging him into this all, but I was glad that he had become someone powerful and that he had found McKenna's love.

I remembered my mother telling me about my father's death and then standing next to his grave. I wondered if I would see him soon.

So many memories. Most of them recent, it seemed. I suppose I had lived more life in the last year than most people live in eighty. That was good. Because I knew that mine was coming to an end.

Suddenly my body began tingling and I felt a wave of electricity pass through me, lifting the hair on my head. I took a deep breath, then held up my hand with my fist clenched.

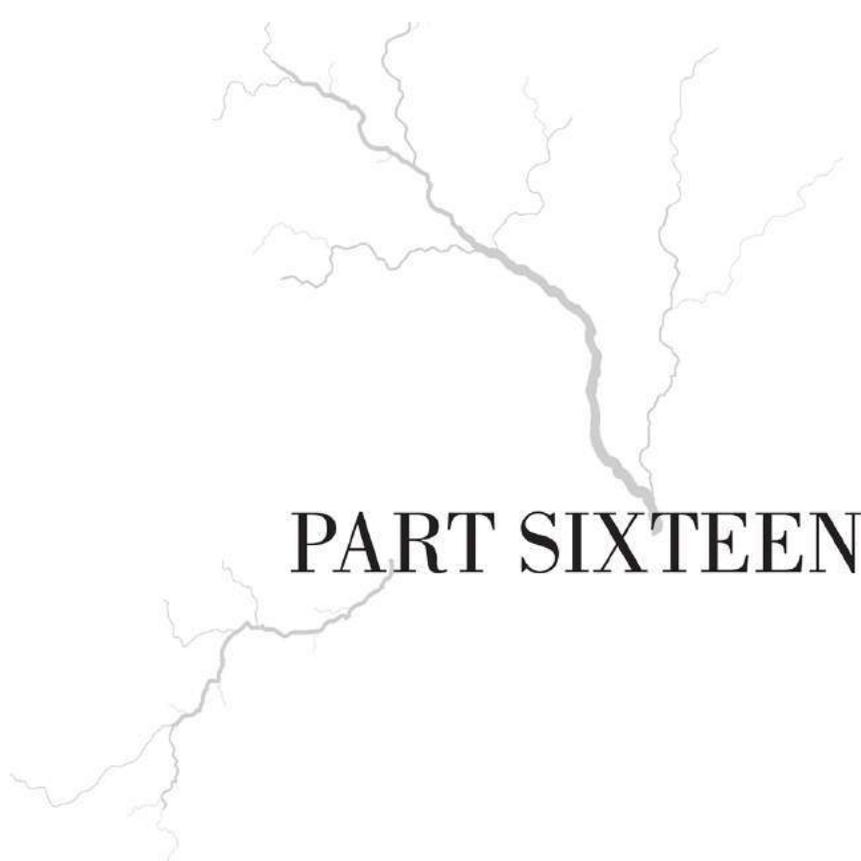
"Come on!" I shouted to the clouds. To the gods of lightning. "Come on! Just do it! Strike me!"



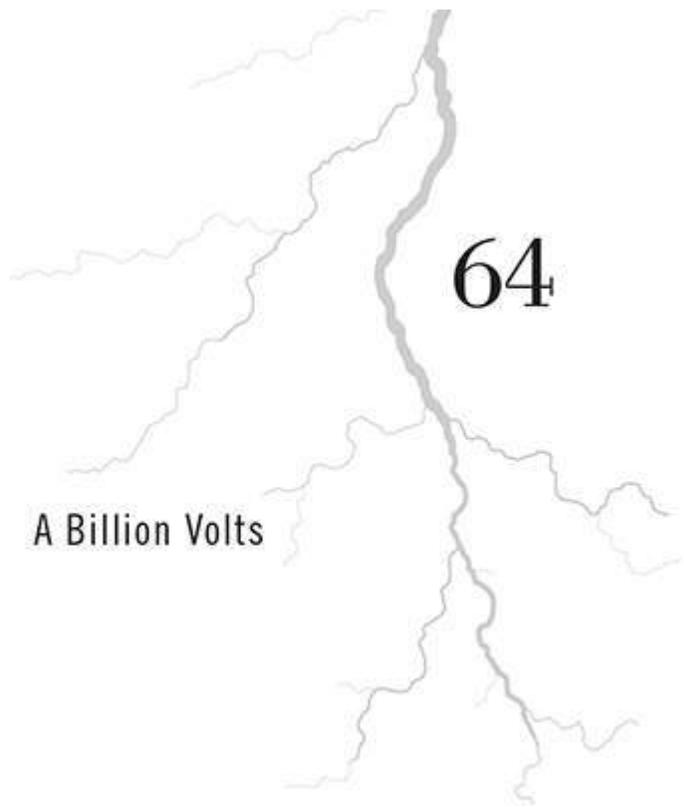
During accidents and other catastrophic events, time seems to slow down, sometimes even to freeze, like advancing one frame at a time on a DVD player.

When the lightning struck, everything froze. Time froze. I don't know how to explain this, but time became light. Light became time. My skin was impossibly bright. I remember thinking that if I weren't electric, the light would have burned the retinas from my eyes.

Next came the sound, like a hundred thousand freight trains running over me. Only this didn't go over me, it went into me, through me. It became *me*. I was lightning. I was pure energy. Maybe for a fraction of one second I felt what it feels like to be God. But I'm no god.



PART SIXTEEN



In 1945, at an army testing site in New Mexico, the first atomic bomb was tested. The explosion was enormous, its energy equivalent to that released by 40 million pounds of dynamite—equal to all the energy produced and consumed in the United States every thirty seconds: That’s every car, lamp, diesel, dishwasher, jet airplane, diesel train, factory, everything. However, this bomb’s energy was released in a few millionths of a second, and in a volume only a few inches wide.

The resulting explosion was terrible. The hundred-foot steel tower on which the bomb was mounted was completely vaporized. The ball of air formed by the explosion boiled up to a height of thirty-five thousand feet, higher than Mount Everest. For hundreds of yards around the blast site the surface of the desert sand turned to glass.

* * *

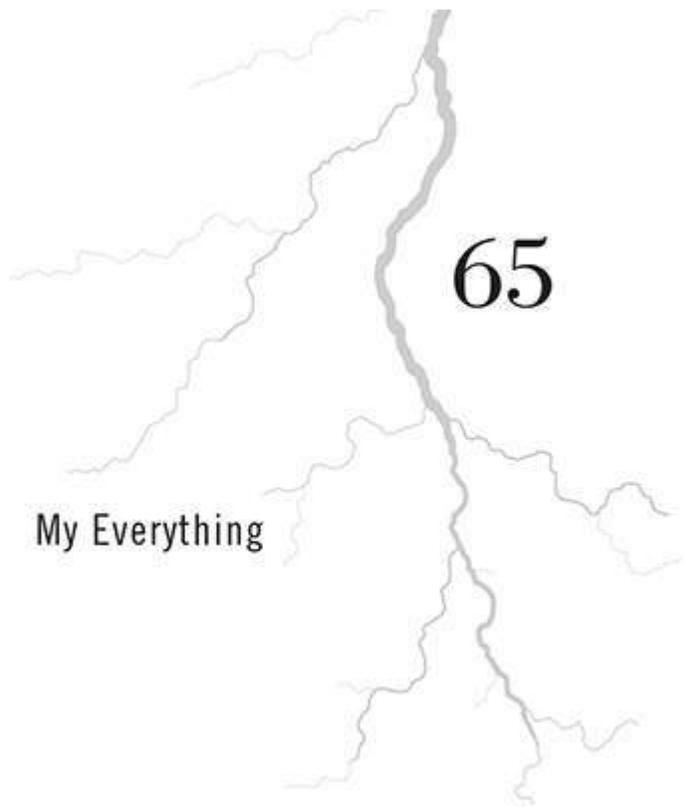
That isn't far from what happened that day on Hades. Hatch was still a mile out to sea when lightning struck the tower, or, more accurately, Michael Vey. No one had ever seen anything like it. It was like being a witness of that first atom bomb testing. The lightning hit but didn't dissipate. Instead, Michael absorbed it. Like the energy of that atom bomb released in a volume only a few inches wide, Michael held all billion volts in a five-foot-six-inch, 126-pound frame.

Michael Vey did something no one had ever done before. He held lightning. Not long, only for a thousandth of a second, but long enough to redirect and amplify the force of the energy. The pulse he created shot outward in a supersonic shockwave that destroyed everything above ground, turning the white, crystal sand of Hades to glass. The flash was so intense that it was seen as far away as Nike and by pilots in Australia and New Zealand.

The few Elgen guards at sea who survived the blast were blinded by the light, and had Hatch not been wearing his special sunglasses, he would have been also.

All of the Elgen boats engaged in the siege either caught fire or were capsized by the resultant waves.

Hatch, with twelve crew members and his personal guards, escaped in one of the *Faraday's* life pods, the only one that hadn't been damaged by the heat. Twelve hours later, he reached Nike broken and ranting. He still didn't know that the *Joule* had been stolen.



It was a full hour after the blast that Jack, Ostin, Ian, and five of the natives dug themselves out of the tunnel. They emerged from a small hole, cautiously rising like prairie dogs in a vast wasteland.

Jack was the first to climb out, his hair and clothes dusted white with fine sand. The rain had stopped. The heat of the blast had evaporated or emptied the clouds, and Jack just stood there, dumbstruck, looking around the scorched island in awe. Only Ian, who had watched the transformation from below, wasn't in complete shock. It was as if they had gone into the tunnel, only to have been transported to another planet.

Then the rest of the tunnel's inhabitants, almost fifty in all, began to emerge into the surreal landscape. All were silent, speechless, walking around as if in a daze.

Then the natives began wailing in the Tuvaluan tongue. Many of them knelt down, touching their foreheads to the earth.

“Unbelievable,” Jack said softly.

“It looks like Hiroshima after the bomb,” Ostin said.

Jack turned to Ostin. “Was that Michael?”

Ostin just stood there gazing out into the horizon. “It’s possible.” He turned to look at the tower. Only the clawlike metal supports mounted to concrete pylons remained. All but the bottom five feet of the tower had been incinerated. A lump came to Ostin’s throat. “I think it was Michael.”

Just then Taylor and McKenna came up out of the tunnel. The sight of the melted world stopped them. “Where’s Michael?” Taylor asked. She turned to Ostin. “Where’s Michael?”

She looked over to where the tower had been and saw nothing but the ends of scorched and melted beams. “Where’s Michael?!” she screamed.

“He’s gone,” Ostin said. He turned to Taylor. “He’s gone.”

For a moment she froze. Then she ran to Ostin and shook him. “Don’t say it! Don’t say it!”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t say it,” she said again. She fell to her knees, then to her chest, overcome by the pain of loss. “Don’t say he’s gone.”

Ostin sat down next to her, tears falling down his cheeks. “He was my best friend.”

Taylor looked up at him. “He was my everything.”

The two of them fell into each other and cried.

* * *

“What do we do now?” Tessa said. “We’re stuck here.”

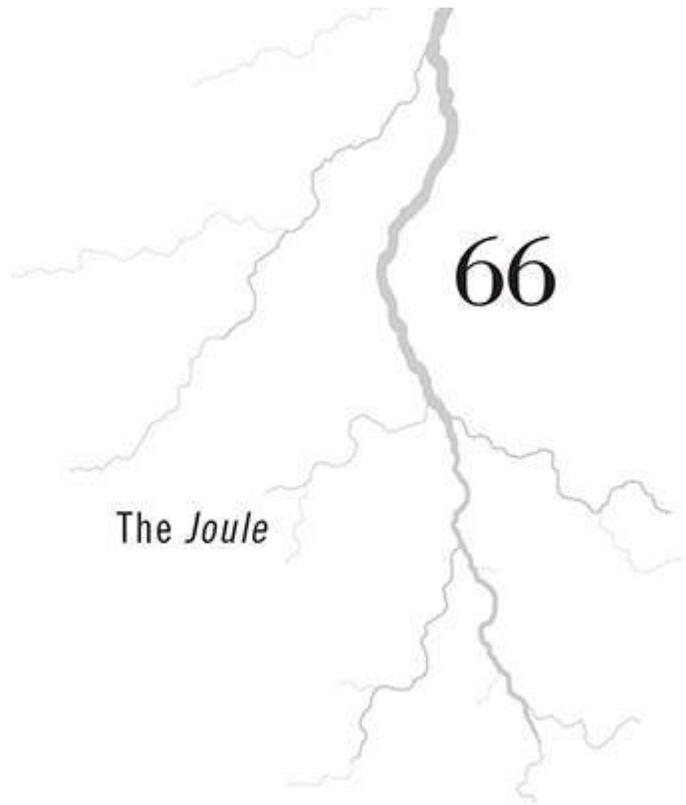
“What about the *Joule*?” McKenna said.

“I doubt they made it,” Zeus said.

Jack shook his head. “If they did, they’re probably halfway to Fiji by now.”

All was silent again when Ian, who had been quietly looking out into the distance for a while, said, “No, they’re not.”

Everyone turned. To the north, only about two hundred yards in the distance, the *Joule* was rising up out of the ocean.



“They did it,” Ostin said.

Jack looked at the boat in awe. “And they came back. They actually came back. Michael was right.”

A hatch opened on top of the *Joule*, and two figures emerged.

“It’s Welch and Quentin,” Ian said.

The Electroclan watched as a panel on the *Joule* folded down, with a small boat connected to it. The two figures climbed into the boat, and a mechanical arm lowered them into the sea. There was no sound as the boat headed toward the shore, crossing over the reef, and running up onto the glass beach.

As they stepped out, Welch and Quentin looked around at the devastation. “What happened?” Quentin asked. “It looks like a nuclear blast.”

“It wasn’t,” Ostin said.

Welch looked around for a moment, then at the surviving members of the Electroclan, and said, "Let's get out of here. Is everyone here?"

"We lost some," McKenna said. "Tanner and Gervaso."

Welch's head dropped. "I'm sorry. Anyone else?"

No one spoke. No one could. Welch looked around for a moment, then said, "Where's Michael?"

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Author photo by Debra MacFarlane

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SIMON PULSE / MERCURY INK

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division

1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

www.SimonandSchuster.com

First Simon Pulse/Mercury Ink hardcover edition September 2016

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248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Jacket designed by Jessica Handelman

Interior designed by Mike Rosamilia

The text of this book was set in Berling LT Std.

Library of Congress Control Number 2016943336

ISBN 978-1-4814-6982-1 (hc)

ISBN 978-1-4814-6984-5 (eBook)

M⚡CHAEEL VEY

THE FINAL SPARK



#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* AND *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RICHARD PAUL EVANS

To my talented daughter, Jenna Evans Welch (the author of Love & Gelato), who, for seven years, helped bring Michael Vey to life



Dossier: The Electric Youths

Michael Vey

Power: Ability to shock people through direct contact or conduction. Can also absorb other electric children's powers.

Michael is the most powerful of all the electric children and leader of the Electroclan. He is steadily increasing in power. He also has Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder that causes tics or other involuntary movements. Elgen scientists believe his Tourette's is somehow connected to his electricity.

Ostin Liss

Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Ostin is very intelligent, with an IQ of 155, which puts him at the same level as the average Nobel Prize winner. He is one of the original three members of the Electroclan and Michael's best friend.

Taylor Ridley

Power: Ability to temporarily scramble the electric synapses in the brain, causing confusion. She can also read people's minds, but only when touching them.

Taylor is one of the original three members of the Electroclan. She and Michael discovered each other's powers at Meridian High School, which

they were both attending. She is Michael's girlfriend.

Abigail

Power: Ability to temporarily ease or stop pain by electrically stimulating certain parts of the brain. She must be touching the person to do so.

Along with Ian and McKenna, Abigail was held captive by the Elgen for many years because she refused to follow Hatch. She joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison, known as Purgatory.

Bryan

Power: The ability to create highly focused electricity that allows him to cut through objects, especially metal.

Bryan is one of Hatch's Glows. He spends most of his time playing video games and annoying Kylee.

Cassy

Power: Ability to electrically contract or "freeze" muscles from remarkable distances.

One of the most powerful of the electric children, Cassy is also the only one to be found by the resistance before the Elgen. She has lived with the voice since she was four years old. Her job, in addition to special missions and acting as the voice's bodyguard, is to keep track of the electric children. She is well versed on each of their powers and on the backgrounds of both the Glows and the Electroclan. She is a big fan of Michael Vey.

Grace

Power: Grace acts as a "human flash drive" and is able to transfer and store large amounts of electronic data.

Grace was living with the Elgen but joined the Electroclan when they defeated Hatch at the Elgen Academy. She has been working and living

with the resistance but has not been on any missions with the Electroclan.

Ian

Power: Ability to see using electrolocation, which is the same way sharks and eels see through muddy or murky water.

Along with McKenna and Abigail, Ian was held captive by the Elgen for many years because he refused to follow Hatch. He joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison, known as Purgatory.

Jack

Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Jack spends a lot of time in the gym and is very strong. He is also excellent with cars. Originally one of Michael's bullies, he joined the Electroclan after Michael bribed him to help Michael rescue his mother from Dr. Hatch.

Kylee

Power: Born with the ability to create electromagnetic power, she is basically a human magnet.

One of Hatch's Glows, she spends most of her time shopping, along with her best (and only) friend, Tara.

McKenna

Power: Ability to create light and heat. She can heat herself to more than three thousand kelvins.

Along with Ian and Abigail, McKenna was held captive by the Elgen for many years because she refused to follow Hatch. She joined the Electroclan after escaping from the Elgen Academy's prison, known as Purgatory.

Nichelle

Power: Nichelle acts as an electrical ground and can both detect and drain the powers of the other electric children. She can also, on a weaker level than Tessa, enhance the other children's powers.

Nichelle was Hatch's enforcer over the rest of the electric children until he abandoned her during the battle at the Elgen Academy. Although everyone was nervous about it, the Electroclan recruited her to join them on their mission to save Jade Dragon. She has become a loyal Electroclan member.

Quentin

Power: Ability to create isolated electromagnetic pulses, which lets him take out all electrical devices within twenty yards.

Quentin is smart and, before his defection, was regarded by the Elgen as second-in-command, just below Hatch. He is now a member of the Electroclan.

Tanner

Power: Ability to interfere with the electrical navigation systems of aircraft and cause them to malfunction and crash. His powers are so advanced that he can do this from the ground.

After years of mistreatment by the Elgen, Tanner was rescued by the Electroclan from the Peruvian Starxource plant. He then stayed with the resistance so he had a chance to recover. He was killed in the battle of Hades.

Tara

Power: Tara's abilities are similar to her twin sister, Taylor's, in that she can disrupt normal electronic brain functions. Through years of training and refining her powers, Tara has learned to focus on specific parts of the brain in order to create emotions such as fear or joy.

Working with the Elgen scientists, she has learned how to create mental illusions, which, among other things, allows her to make people appear as someone or something else.

Tara is one of Hatch's former Glows. She and Taylor were adopted by different families after they were born, and Tara lived with Hatch and the Elgen from the time she was six years old until she was rescued by the Electroclan.

Tessa

Power: Tessa's abilities are the opposite of Nichelle's—she is able to enhance the powers of the other electric children.

Tessa escaped from the Elgen at the Starxource plant in Peru and lived in the Amazon jungle for six months with an indigenous tribe called the Amacarra. She joined the Electroclan after the tribe rescued Michael from the Elgen and brought them together.

Torstyn

Power: One of the more ruthless and lethal of the electric children, Torstyn can create microwaves.

Torstyn is one of Hatch's former Glows and was instrumental to the Elgen in building the original Starxource plants. Although they were initially enemies, Torstyn is loyal to Quentin and acts as his bodyguard. He defied Hatch and joined the Electroclan.

Wade

Power: A Nonel—not electric.

Wade was Jack's best friend and joined the Electroclan at the same time he did. Wade died in Peru when the Electroclan was surprised by an Elgen guard.

Zeus

Power: Ability to “throw” electricity from his body.

Zeus was kidnapped by the Elgen as a young child and lived for many years as one of Hatch's Glows. He joined the Electroclan when they escaped from the Elgen Academy. His real name is Leonard Frank Smith.

PART ONE



1

Escaping Hades

Former EGG David Welch stood alone on the *Joule's* deck as he panned his binoculars over the smoldering prison island of Hades. At least what was left of it. Everywhere he looked was death. What few trees and foliage the Elgen had left on the island were still burning or glowing in heaps of red and orange embers. Around them scorched human skeletons and bones lay strewn across the landscape like straw after a windstorm. The island's sand, now mostly melted to glass, glistened where streams of morning sunlight broke through the retreating storm clouds, reflecting the vibrant prisms of the color spectrum. Had it not been so terrible, it almost would have been beautiful.

On one side of the crystalline beach were the only signs of life—the scurrying Tuvaluan natives who, along with the Electroclan, had survived the Elgen attack and taken shelter in the underground bunker before the explosion. Welch had left the natives water, food, and the *Joule's* remaining life rafts to make their journey back to their home islands. Their leader, Enele Saluni, grandson of the former Tuvaluan prime minister (who, at Hatch's orders, had been sentenced

to life on display, naked in a monkey cage in the Tuvaluan capital), saluted Welch from the distance. Welch lowered his binoculars and saluted back.

“Everyone’s below,” Jack said, climbing up the conning tower behind Welch. “Everyone’s here.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone who made it,” Jack said hoarsely.

Welch raised his binoculars one more time and scanned the horizon along the northern end of the island, looking for signs of Elgen. Again he saw nothing of the once terrible force—at least nothing that was still alive. “All right. Let’s get out of here.”

Welch followed Jack down the inside of the *Joule’s* conning tower, pausing on the ladder near the top as hydraulic pistons pulled the hatch closed. Pneumatic clamps hissed and clicked around him as the steel hatch was locked airtight. Then Welch climbed down to join the others in the Conn, the *Joule’s* control center.

“Take us down,” Welch said to the boat’s COB—the chief of the boat—as he stepped from the ladder onto the metal floor.

Even though the *Joule* could travel as much as fifteen knots faster above surface, Welch didn’t want to take the chance of being seen. Outside of the *Joule’s* crew members who Welch had set adrift, he didn’t know who had survived. He didn’t even know if Hatch had survived. Perhaps no one had. But still, there was no sense in taking chances.

“Yes, sir,” the Elgen COB replied, speaking into his microphone. “Down twenty meters.”

* * *

Including the COB, there were five Elgen still on the *Joule* and one Fijian servant. Twelve hours earlier, when Welch and his Glows—Quentin, Tara, Torstyn, and Cassy—had hijacked the *Joule*, they’d disarmed the seventeen-man crew and then sent everyone off the boat, except for the *Joule’s* COB and the four crew members needed to operate the ship.

Welch had also sent J.D., the boat captain who had betrayed the Electroclan by sailing them into a trap, and his crew with the Elgen.

“Man, don’t leave me here,” J.D. had said, clinging to the one life raft Welch had left them. “I helped you take this boat.”

“You’re lucky I’m leaving you alive,” Welch said. “But don’t get used to it. When Hatch finds out that you helped us hijack the *Joule*, he’ll feed you to his rats.”

“You will all die,” J.D. said. “Like *rats*.”

Welch looked at him stoically. “Everyone dies. Some just sooner than others. And some, one bite at a time.”

J.D. looked at Welch hatefully. “I will die as I choose. No one takes my life but me.” Then, letting go of the raft, he sunk down in the black water beneath the heaving waves. He never came up again.

“So ends the traitor,” Welch said to himself.

Quentin had disabled the raft’s outboard motor and radio with an EMP so the Elgen would not be able to alert anyone for hours, giving Welch and the Glows the time they needed to get back to Hades to rescue their friends. That was, if their friends were still alive. Even thirty miles from Hades, they saw and heard the massive explosion. Welch’s first thought was that Hatch had detonated some kind of nuclear device to destroy the island. But there was no mushroom cloud or, outside of the flash, evidence of a nuclear weapon. They weren’t going to leave the islands until they knew for certain if any of their friends had survived.

Hours later, when Welch and company surfaced the *Joule* off the coast of Hades, they couldn’t believe what they saw. All the Elgen boats were sunk or burning on the surface. They were relieved to find the Electroclan huddled on the beach.

Welch and Quentin sailed to shore to pick up their friends, leaving Cassy, Torstyn, and Tara on board to secure the ship.

Ten minutes after Welch and Quentin left, one of the Elgen crewmen approached Cassy. “Hey, baby. We’ve been cooped up a long, long time.”

“I’m not your baby,” she said. “And don’t take another step.”

He kept walking. “What’s a little girl like you going to do to stop a big man like me?”

Cassy pursed her lips. “You had to ask.” She froze the man’s entire body, including his lungs. He fell over, dropping to the floor with a loud thud.

When she let him go, he gasped for breath, then said, “Please don’t do that again.”

“When I tell you to stop walking, you stop walking. Next time you won’t breathe again. Ever. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled sardonically. “‘Ma’am’? What happened to ‘baby’?”

* * *

Jack was the last to board, gathering the teens in one corner of the Conn. The room echoed with the sounds of grief—sobbing and crying. Especially from Taylor, who was inconsolable. “Michael,” she said over and over. “My Michael.”

McKenna’s arms were around Taylor, the two of them slightly rocking.

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” Taylor said.

McKenna wiped her eyes. “I can’t believe any of this.”

Ostin watched them silently, too emotional to speak. His eyes were red and swollen.

“I knew he had a hero’s heart,” Jack said. “I knew it the moment he came to my door to ask me to take him to California.”

Just then Cassy walked into the Conn. She glanced around the room, then asked, “Where’s Michael?”

From everyone’s silence she knew something bad had happened. She raised her hand to her mouth. “Oh no.”

“He didn’t make it,” Quentin said.

Cassy started crying. She looked over at Taylor. “I’m so sorry.”

Cassy walked over, and the two of them hugged.

“I know you cared about him too,” Taylor said.

“I . . .”

“It’s okay that you loved him too,” she said softly. “He was easy to love.”

“Michael’s not the only one we lost,” Ian said. “We lost Gervaso and Tanner, too.”

Jack swallowed in pain, fighting back tears. Gervaso had been more of a father to him than his real father. Abigail put her arms around him and comforted him with her powers.

“Please don’t,” Jack said. “I want to feel the pain.”

Abigail stopped pulsing. “I understand.”

Jack furtively wiped his eyes, then looked out at the others. “Gervaso told me that when he was in ranger training, his drill sergeant told them that they were all going to hell. The only consolation was that they’d already been there, so it wouldn’t matter.” He rubbed his eyes. “If there’s a heaven, I think there’s a special pass for heroes.”

“I think so too,” Zeus said. “There’s far too few of them as it is.”

“Someday we’ll return,” Welch said. “When the world has changed. We’ll build a memorial to the three of them. Then the whole world will know what they’ve sacrificed.”

There was something hopeful in what Welch had said. After a few more minutes Welch said, “You must all be exhausted. Get some rest.” He turned to Tara. “Take them to their bunks.”

“Yes, sir,” Tara said. “Everyone, follow me.”

“Except Cassy,” Welch said. “You stay with me. I need some backup.”

“Yes, sir.”

The rest of the teens followed Tara, single file, out of the Conn. None of them had ever seen anything like the *Joule* before, which wasn’t surprising, since the *Joule* was the only ship of its kind ever built—a hybrid vault, ship, and submarine. It was tight and narrow with no portholes. Air, mostly recycled, was continually pumped throughout the vessel, and filled the echoing chambers with a continual hissing. The walls were all riveted metal, as was the floor, which had been coated with thick rubberized flooring that softened and dulled the sound of their footsteps as they walked.

Tara led them down a narrow corridor past the commander’s quarters to the first of two bunk rooms. The compartment was designed solely for sleeping. It was only twelve feet wide, with pipe-

framed cots on both sides of the room with trampoline-like mattresses. The cots were connected, by brackets, on one side to the wall, while the other side was supported from the ceiling by chains. The beds were stacked four high, with only a few feet of headroom; the bottom bunks were suspended only three inches above the floor.

“This is where we sleep,” Tara said. “It’s tight, but the *Joule* is basically a submarine. Everything’s tight. Welch wants us all to stay in the same room so we can lock the Elgen crew members in the other.”

“I don’t care where I sleep,” Jack said. “As long as I’m horizontal. I feel like I’m sleepwalking.” He took off his shoes and then, using the edges of the lower bunks as steps, climbed up onto the top bunk. Everyone else claimed bunks, except Taylor, who just stood in the middle of the room looking lost.

“C’mon, honey,” Abigail said. “You need some rest. You’ll feel a little better after you get some rest.”

“Sleep won’t take this away,” Taylor said. “Unless I never wake up.”

“I can’t take it away, but I can help. Just lie down right here, sweetie,” Abigail said, pulling down the covers on a bottom bunk.

Taylor took off her shoes and crawled out across the cot, lying on her back.

“Now just relax,” Abigail said. She put her hands on Taylor’s head and lightly pulsed. At first, Taylor shuddered; then her body calmed and she breathed out deeply. Within moments she was asleep.

“You have a beautiful gift,” Tara said softly.

“Thank you,” Abigail said.

For a moment everyone was quiet and the only sounds were the constant hissing of the *Joule*’s air system, Jack’s snoring, and the strained, eerie groaning of the vessel. Every now and then the boat creaked like a heavy door on a rusty hinge.

“Does that sound ever stop?” McKenna asked.

“Probably not,” Ostin said, speaking for the first time since they’d boarded. His voice was raw and strained.

The pain in his voice hurt her. “Hey, tell me some facts about submarines.”

“Sorry,” Ostin said. “I’m not in the mood.”

McKenna frowned. “How deep do you think we are?”

Ostin breathed out slowly. "The *Joule* can dive to six hundred feet."
"What makes that sound?"

Ostin sniffed, then said softly, "At six hundred feet the water pressure is 282.6 pounds per square inch. That's a lot of pressure on a pressurized can."

"I heard that the Elgen carry all their wealth in this boat."

"Not all of it," Ostin said. "Just enough for a rainy day."

"That would be a lot of rain," Ian said, suddenly joining the conversation. "There are stacks of gold bullion running two feet high across the length of the boat."

"They'd have to use that much weight as ballast," Ostin said.

"There's also diamonds and boxes of paper currency. I could open the safes that hold them," Ian said. "Just for fun."

"That would be fun to see," McKenna answered. "Maybe someday we'll share in all that loot."

"Maybe," Ostin said, sounding not at all interested.

Abigail glanced back at McKenna with a sad smile, then climbed onto the bunk above Taylor.

An hour later Cassy walked into the bunk room. "Lunch is ready," she said softly. No one moved. Everyone was asleep. After a few minutes, Cassy went back to the Conn to keep Welch company.



2

How Many Elgen Does It Take to Screw In a Light Bulb?

After all the physical and emotional stress they'd been through over the last week, their exhaustion finally took over and they slept more than eighteen hours. Jack was the first to wake. He looked around the dark room lit only by the glows of his electric friends. With no portholes there was no way of knowing if it was day or night.

He climbed down from his bunk as quietly as possible, then walked back up to the Conn. Welch looked up at him as he entered. Jack had bed hair, the bulk of it pressed to the right side of his head.

"Looks like you got some rest," Welch said.

"Yeah."

"Anyone else up?"

"Not yet."

"We probably should wake them in the next hour or so or they'll be up all night."

"There is no night and day down here," Jack said. "What does it matter?"

“We need a schedule,” Welch said. “Cassy and I are going to need sleep.”

Just then Tessa, Zeus, and Ian walked into the Conn. “We can watch the Conn,” Zeus said.

“My men need sleep too,” the COB said.

“We can’t stop sailing,” Welch said.

“We don’t need to. The *Joule’s* completely automated. We can program our course, and she can run on autopilot. If there’s a problem, she alerts our room.”

Ostin, McKenna, Abigail, and Tara walked in.

“Everyone’s up except Taylor,” Tara said.

“Let her sleep,” Welch said. “Cassy, you can go rest.”

“No problem,” she said, yawning as she stood.

“Tara, would you mind showing them to the dining room?” Welch asked.

“I can,” Cassy said. “I think I’ll get something.” She turned to the others. “Let’s go.” Cassy led them down a ladder and then in the opposite direction of the bunks to the *Joule’s* dining area. Like the rest of the boat, every inch was used as efficiently as possible. Against one wall were bins of dried fruit and grains. Jack opened a canister that read: DRIED MANGO. He grabbed a handful of the dried fruit and tossed it into his mouth. The others followed his example, opening other bins of fruit: pineapple, guava, and apple. They were hungrily devouring the fruit when a young Fijian girl walked into the room. She stopped near the door, looking at all the people. “Cassy?”

“Hey,” Cassy said. She turned to the others. “Guys, this is Kiki. She’s the ship’s cook. We didn’t think she would be safe with the Elgen, so we kept her with us.”

“Welcome to the *Joule*,” Kiki said with a slight British accent. “The new captain Welch asked me to prepare something for you to eat. I’m making spaghetti for tonight. For now, I have baked rolls and meats for sandwiches.”

“What kind of sandwiches do you have?” Jack asked.

“We have fish, pork, Vegemite, and Nutella.”

Jack squinted. “What’s Nutella?”

“It’s chocolate spread,” Tara said. “It’s good.”

“A chocolate sandwich,” McKenna said. “It’s about time someone invented that.”

“I think you all must be very hungry,” Kiki said.

“Starving,” Ostin said. “We haven’t eaten anything for more than a day.”

“I will fix that.” Kiki opened a cupboard and brought out a basket filled with scones. “The Elgen liked my scones with papaya jam and cream.” She set the container on the table. “I also have fruit salad.” She took out another bowl and set it on the table. Then she brought out a stack of bowls and several handfuls of utensils. “Please, help yourself. Eat.”

Taylor walked into the room. She hesitated near the doorway. McKenna thought she looked a little better. Not good, but better.

“How are you?” McKenna asked.

Taylor shrugged.

As she walked over and sat down next to McKenna, Kiki began boiling water for tea while Cassy cut the homemade bread into slices and then brought out plates and what they needed for sandwiches: grilled pork steak, salted mackerel and tuna, lettuce and tomatoes grown on the islands, mayonnaise, mustard, Vegemite, and a large plastic container of Nutella. Everyone ate ravenously except for Taylor.

McKenna said to her, “You need to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“That’s why you need to eat. We don’t know what’s ahead, and we all need to keep our strength. If you won’t eat for yourself, eat for the rest of us.”

Taylor looked at her. “If I slow you down, you can leave me.”

“You know we would never do that.” McKenna gave her a slice of bread with Nutella. “Please. Eat something.”

Taylor just looked down at the sandwich.

“What would Michael say?”

Taylor erupted. “Nothing! He’d say nothing! He’s gone!”

Everyone stopped eating and looked at Taylor. Taylor looked around, then said, “I’m sorry.”

McKenna touched her chest over her heart. "He's not gone. He's here." She touched Taylor's chest. "And there. He will always be there."

Taylor dabbed at her eyes with a napkin. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

McKenna hugged her, and Taylor put her head on the other girl's shoulder.

"You don't need to apologize," McKenna said softly. "We understand. Everyone understands."

After a few minutes Taylor stopped crying and sat back. Then she lifted the bread and took a bite.

"Thank you," McKenna said.

"Thank you," Taylor said. "You care more about me than I do about myself."

* * *

A few minutes later Cassy said, "The tea's ready. Help yourself. I'm going to bed."

"Wait," Kiki said. "I have a surprise." She opened a cupboard and brought out a cake topped with baked pineapple. "The Elgen were celebrating a birthday and made me bake a cake for them. They never got a chance to eat it."

"That makes me happy on two accounts," Jack said. "You, Kiki, are the best thing that's happened to us for days."

"With the days you've had," Kiki said, "I don't think that would be very hard to do."

PART TWO



3

Building an Army

Almost two hours after the *Joule* set sail, Enele Saluni and the rest of the Tuvaluan prisoners completed their walk-through of Hades island, gathering the Elgen weapons and ammunition that had survived the battle. Many of the rifles were pried from the charred, skeletal hands of dead Elgen soldiers. The bones crumbled as the Tuvaluans pulled the weapons loose. With the magnitude of the Elgen's assault, Enele's men easily gathered more weapons and ammunition than they could use. Still, at Enele's insistence, they took all they could, filling the bottom of their small boats with as many rifles and as much ammunition as they could carry. They planned to provide weapons for the Tuvaluans they recruited into their army, and they didn't know if weapons would be available on the other islands.

Tragically, of the hundreds of Tuvaluan natives that the Elgen had sent to their prison on Hades, only a few dozen remained. Enele divided the survivors up between the three boats that Welch had left them, putting his two strongest warriors, Zeel and Nazil, in charge of the other two craft. Before setting sail the three men gathered together to plan their mission.

“We’re ready,” Nazil said, speaking for both himself and Zeel. “Our boats are full of weapons.”

“How many arms have you collected?” Enele asked.

“Seventy-three rifles, twenty-five magazines of ammo, and twenty-four grenades.”

Enele turned to Zeel. “And you?”

“Sixty-nine rifles, twelve sidearms, thirty-four magazines of bullets, and one fifty-millimeter machine gun with about three thousand rounds.”

Enele wiped the sweat from his forehead, then said, “That will do for now. It’s time to go.”

“Where are we going now?” Nazil asked.

“We sail to Nanumaga.”

“Nanumaga?” Nazil said with surprise.

“Yes. Then Vaitupu.”

Nazil and Zeel glanced at each other in surprise.

“Not to Funafuti?” Nazil asked.

“If Hatch is still alive,” Zeel said, “he will be in his Starxource plant in Funafuti. We should sail to Funafuti first.”

Enele looked at them angrily. “You don’t think I have more reason than anyone to sail to Funafuti?! My grandfather is being held there in a monkey cage. Yes, I know Hatch will be in Funafuti. And for good reason. It’s his stronghold. The man, Welch, told me that Hatch has enough weapons in his Starxource plant to destroy our nation many times over. What are you thinking? To attack him with the thirty-two of us? Any fool can attack an army and die. A wise man doesn’t plan an attack; he plans a victory. I will act the part of the wise man. We will build an army, then, when we are strong enough, attack. Do you disagree with me?”

Both men sheepishly shook their heads.

“Then we sail to Nanumaga. The Elgen brought many of our people there to work the fields and run cattle. There we’ll find food, soldiers, and large produce boats to transport them. If we are lucky, we can gather more than five hundred soldiers. After we have taken what we can, we’ll sail to Vaitupu, where the Elgen train their soldiers. There we’ll find more weapons. There may even be warships.

“Then, after we have sufficiently armed our soldiers, then, and *only* then, will we attack Funafuti. Then we *will* be victorious.”

“Our apologies,” Nazil said. “You are wiser than us. You let your intelligence not your anger rule you.”

Enele looked at his comrades sympathetically. “You both have great reason to be angry. You are loyal Tuvaluans, as well as courageous warriors. You’ve seen Hatch’s cruelty to our people. You’ve suffered that cruelty. I too am filled with anger so deep, I fear it might consume me. There’s no doubt that the time will come when anger will rule us all. But for now, we must remain in control. We’ve an army to build.”



4

The Bati Kadi

It was shortly before noon when Enele's three boats sailed nearly due west for Nanumaga—the diamond-shaped Tuvaluan island that Hatch had renamed Demeter, for the Greek god of agriculture.

Demeter island was nearly the same size as Hades, but the similarities stopped there. Hades had been a vast, ugly wasteland even before the battle. At Hatch's command, the Elgen had slashed and burned their way through the once beautiful island, stripping it of its foliage, making it more difficult for prisoners to escape or hide. The uglifying of the island had another effect that worked well with the Elgen's plans. It made the island look like death. The Tuvaluans said of Hades, "No one ever comes back."

Demeter was the opposite of Hades—it was a lush, tropical paradise abundant with vegetation and farming. Originally, the Tuvaluans grew only a few crops on the island: copra, coconuts, and breadfruit, all largely for export. But the Elgen had interest only in their own self-sufficiency, so they now grew only what they needed and consumed: tomatoes, potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, cabbage,

eggplant, arugula, strawberries, taro, and, at Hatch's request, jalapeños.

Demeter was sixty-two nautical miles from Hades, which took the small boats almost three hours to traverse. With Enele in the lead boat, the small Tuvaluan force landed on the island's northern shore beneath the inland cover of a partially submerged mangrove forest. They hid their boats among the trees, taking only the weapons they could use, and then made their way, on foot, to the labor camps where the Elgen had forced their families and friends into slavery.

The Elgen had realized that one of the advantages of operating on a small island was that there was no need to build fences to keep the workers in. Without boats, there was no escaping, and the only fences were those around the Elgen compound, for protection in case of a slave uprising, and the fences around the Tuvaluan sleeping quarters, to keep the slaves under control at night.

In addition, the workers had all been injected with RFIDs, radio-frequency identification, technology that the Elgen had mastered when their headquarters were still located in California. By tagging each of the slaves, the Elgen could not only track their movements, but even monitor how much work each person accomplished or not, and punish them accordingly.

The force stopped when they reached the edge of the forest. Before them lay acres of crops tended by hundreds of Tuvaluans. It made Enele angry to see the condition his fellow Tuvaluans were in. Their clothes were dirty and torn, some barely covering the emaciated bodies that wore them. The Elgen fed them little, making the threat of withholding food a severe punishment if not a death sentence.

"Look at them," Zeel said. "I will kill the first Elgen I see."

"I don't see any Elgen," Enele said. He turned back. "Nazil?"

"None."

"They may be watching their slaves from cameras," Enele said. "They love cameras." He turned to the men. "I will take just two with me, Adam and Raphe. Divide the rest of our people into two groups. Nazil, take your group to the south side of the field and work your way through, gathering soldiers as you go. Zeel, you keep your group

hidden here. If the Elgen attack, they will not suspect a hidden force, and you can attack them from behind. Understood?”

“Yes,” Nazil said. “But what will you and the two young men do?”

“We will be the *Bati Kadi*.”

Zeel and Nazil both nodded. *Bati Kadi*, meaning “the pinchers of the black ant,” were the ninjas of the South Pacific, stealthy warriors who infiltrated the enemy line to slay their unsuspecting foes.

“We’ll sneak into the Elgen’s headquarters and take them by surprise.”

“Why don’t you take more men against the compound?” Zeel asked. “It is their most fortified place.”

“That is why, Zeel. It is their most fortified place and far too powerful to attack with as few men as we have. But a mouse may enter where a lion cannot.” Enele leaned over and strapped a holster around his leg, instructing his two new companions to do the same.

The two men Enele had selected were brothers, Adam and Raphe Sopoaga. Enele had met the brothers in prison on Hades, where they had been sent for beating up an Elgen guard who had tased an elderly Tuvaluan woman for the amusement of it. Enele had gotten especially close to Adam, who was the younger of the two brothers, but more outspoken in his passion for liberty. They were young and nimble, traits more important than size when playing the role of *Bati Kadi*. But even more important, both of them had spent time working as slaves on the island before being sent to Hades. Adam had even been inside the compound before being transferred off the island.

“If we do not return,” Enele said, “you will lead your new soldiers back to our boats and arm all you can. Then you will attack the Elgen compound. After you have defeated them, take their weapons, reclaim the rest of the weapons from the boats, and then take their boats and sail to Vaitupu for weapons. Free our country.”

“Yes, Enele,” Nazil said. “But let us hope that you return.”

“That is my hope as well.” Enele saluted them. “Go with strength.”

“Go with strength,” they echoed.

The soldiers separated. Enele and the brothers moved quickly north through thick foliage toward the Elgen’s compound. Enele hoped that Hatch had depleted his Demeter forces in his attack on

Hades, but he didn't count on it. When they reached the edge of the compound, Enele crawled beneath a bush to get a better look at what they were facing. He didn't like what he saw. Getting into the compound undetected seemed nearly impossible. The compound was completely fenced in, and the Elgen had motion detectors and cameras mounted almost every twenty yards. Still, surprisingly, they could see no guards in the watchtowers or patrolling the grounds.

"There are more secluded places near the back," Adam said. "Follow me."

As they circled back around the compound, Raphe spotted what looked to be a weakness in the compound's security. At the far back side of the building, dark in shade, a giant dakua tree limb partially extended over the barbed fence. The windows facing out toward the tree were frosted or covered with blinds as well as metal bars.

The guard compound hadn't been built by the Elgen. It had originally been the island's sole school building, but the Elgen had added the fence and security, along with other adaptations. The fact that the tree limb was still there seemed to be a huge oversight, a sign of Elgen arrogance, or a trap. Raphe inspected the tree to see if there were any wires attached but found nothing out of the ordinary.

"Maybe there are land mines in the yard," Adam said.

"Perhaps," Enele replied. "Just a moment." He walked a little way into the forest and came back with his arms full of large green coconuts.

"Keep back."

One at a time he lobbed the coconuts over the fence, and each landed on the leaf-strewn ground beneath the limb. Nothing happened.

After tossing the last one, Enele said, "I think we're good." He checked once more to make sure no one was watching. Then one by one they shimmied up the tree and across the bridging tree limb, dropping about eight feet to the ground below. They ran up against the side of the building then, crouched down, and drew their handguns, before cautiously making their way to the first door they could see. It was a heavy iron door with a vertical, mesh-reinforced

Plexiglas window not three inches wide. Not surprisingly, the door was locked.

“We need to go in through the front,” Adam said. “I’ll go first.”

“We’ll go together,” Enele said.

Using the surrounding foliage for cover, the three stole quietly around the side of the building to the front door. There was a long row of windows covered with bars, and video cameras panning along the front walkway into the building. But there was still no sign of Elgen anywhere.

Enele crawled up to the first window and peeked inside through the partially drawn blinds. He could see several desks, but none of them were occupied. He pulled his gun into his chest and turned back to the others and waved them on. They crawled under the windows to the front door, then stood, hidden behind a brick frame.

Enele pointed at the door, counted down from three with his fingers, and then threw the door open. Adam and Raphe stormed inside, their arms outstretched with their guns, prepared for battle.

Nothing.

Enele stepped inside, looking around with caution. They walked across the open lobby to an office, looked inside, then went in, crouching behind the door.

“Where is everyone?” Raphe asked.

Adam shook his head. “I don’t like this.”

“I like it more than a building full of Elgen,” Enele said. He slowly opened the door, then turned back. “Can you smell that?”

Raphe nodded. “Coffee.”

“Someone’s here.”

“Maybe they’re in a meeting,” Adam said.

“I wish I had a grenade,” Raphe said. “Finish them all at once.”

“I’m sure they have grenades,” Enele said, “if we can find their armory. Do you know where it is?”

“I never got that far,” Adam said.

“Let’s keep looking.”

The three of them felt as if they were walking through an abandoned building. But it clearly wasn’t. In addition to the smell of

coffee, they could faintly hear rock music playing from some distant room.

“Music,” whispered Adam, pointing toward a long corridor. Just then an electric camera panned toward them.

“Hide!” Enele said, pushing Adam back through a doorway into another empty office.

“I think we were too late,” Adam said. “If anyone’s watching the control panels, we were just seen.”

They waited a moment for a reaction—any reaction—an alarm or a siren, a PA announcement, the crash of Elgen boots. Nothing came.

“This is weird,” Raphe said.

“Very,” Enele replied.

“Maybe they’re all out in the fields,” Adam said.

As they crept farther down the hall, the music grew louder. Then Enele looked down a darkened stairwell and pointed his gun. The music was coming from downstairs. He turned back to Adam, who nodded. All three of them slowly walked down the stairs, their guns extended, with Raphe covering their backs.

When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Enele looked both ways, then walked toward the music, which seemed to be coming from a room nearly halfway down the corridor.

As they got closer, they could hear low voices coming from behind the door. Enele looked at the other two, making a gesture toward the room. They both lifted their guns. Enele slowly turned the doorknob, looked back at the other two, who nodded, and then threw open the door, stepping inside with his gun ready to fire. “Hands in the air!”

In front of him were three Elgen guards sitting at a table playing poker. They looked over at him in surprise, but no one raised their hands or made a move toward their guns or weapons. In fact, there weren’t any weapons visible. None of the men were dressed in regulation uniforms, rather they were in various stages of undress. Only one of them had shoes, two wore only wrinkled pants and T-shirts, and the third’s shirt was unbuttoned and he wore exercise shorts with black Elgen socks.

The table they sat at was littered with cans of beer, and there was a nearly empty bottle of vodka.

“Put your hands in the air,” Enele repeated.

One of the guards threw down his cards angrily, then raised his hands. His voice was slightly slurred. “Just when I finally get a winning hand. Look at that, a straight flush.”

Adam and Raphe moved in on opposite sides of the table.

“One move, and we open fire,” Enele said.

“Calm down. No one’s goin’ anywhere,” the largest of the guards said in a thick Australian accent. He turned to one of the others. “I told you to lock the front door. That could have been a Zone Cap’n comin’ ’stead o’ this brown skin.”

“I did lock the door,” the other returned.

“No, he didn’t,” Raphe said.

“Where are the others?” Enele asked.

“They all went off to war and never came back.”

“Who’s watching the workers?”

“They don’t need watchin’, mate. Once you get it into someone’s mind they’re a slave, they act the part. Like sheep herd’n’. One man can drive a thousan’.”

“You,” Enele said. “Stand up, hands on your head.”

The man stood.

“Raphe, check him for weapons.”

“I got none.”

Raphe patted him down. “Nothing.”

Oddly, the man in the gym shorts still had his utility belt.

“Take that,” Enele said to Raphe. “And handcuff him.”

Raphe took the man’s utility belt, then handcuffed him and pulled him aside.

“Now you two, on your stomachs. Hands behind your back.”

The other two men got on their knees, then stomachs. Adam handcuffed them. Then he cut a nylon cord from the blinds and tied their feet together. He took the extra cord, hooked it around their feet, and lifted them up, tying one’s legs to a sink faucet, the other to a refrigerator handle, raising them on an incline so their weight was mostly pressing on their chest and face.

“This ain’t the most comfortable,” the smaller of the guards said.

“Would you like a pillow?” Raphe asked.

“Be mighty decent of you,” he replied.

Raphe slapped the guard on the back of his head. “You’re as stupid as you are ugly.”

Enele approached the man still standing. “Who’s in charge here?”

“I am.”

“What’s your position?”

“Commandant.”

“That’s your new name, Elgen. Commandant. Take us to the main control room, where you keep the surveillance.”

“No problem, mate.”

“I’m not your mate. Where’s the rest of your men?”

“You just tied them up.”

“The rest of them.”

“That is them.”

“How many are outside?”

“None, I told you. It’s only us.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I’m tellin’ the truth, mate. Do you think we’d be dressed like this if there were others around to report us? Hatch picked the bone clean for his last escapade. We expected them back by now.”

Enele put the barrel of his gun to the back of the commandant’s head. “If you’re lying, if I see one other Elgen, I pull the trigger. No explanations, just lead through your head. Care to change your story?”

“No. You won’t find another guard outside this building. Not unless they just landed.”

“You should hope they didn’t,” Enele said.

They walked behind the commandant out of the room, and Adam shut the door behind them. With his last stretch of nylon cord, he tied a grenade to the door handle, then looped the end around a fire alarm, then brought it back, tying it to the grenade’s pin.

“What are you doing?” Enele asked.

“They open the door, it blows up.”

“Where’d you learn to do that?” Raphe asked.

“The telly,” Adam said. “*MacGyver*.”

“You totally MacGyvered it,” Raphe replied. “Love that show.”

In spite of the commandant's assurance, or partially because of it, Enele expected more guards. They walked back up the stairs using the commandant as a shield, but still encountered no one else. The commandant led them down the hall to the surveillance room. The room was fairly small but had more than three dozen video monitors. The surveillance room was empty.

They could pretty much see everything on the island, including Nazil leading several hundred natives to the compound. They could also see the compound's entire circumference. Had anyone been paying attention to the monitors, Enele and the boys would have been captured or killed long before they'd made it to the building.

"How did the battle of Hades go?" the commandant asked.

Without looking back, Enele said, "You lost."

"Crikey," he said. "Four thousand men against a dozen of them electric kids?"

"And us," Enele said. "But yes." Enele could see Nazil creeping through the fields, rounding up the Tuvaluan workers. Although he looked as if an Elgen attack were imminent, there were no Elgen visible on any monitor.

"Is there a PA system?" Enele asked.

"It's those buttons right there next to the microphone. Push them all down, that will get you to the whole island."

Enele sat down in front of the microphone and pushed down the row of buttons. They all lit.

"Fellow Tuvaluans, this is Enele Saluni, grandson of Prime Minister Saluni. We have taken this island. It is time for us to fight for our freedom. Do not be afraid. Nazil, Zeel, there appear to be no guards outside the compound. Bring everyone to the Elgen compound."

Enele turned to the commandant. "Where are your weapons?"

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"If you're going to kill me anyway, I've no reason to cooperate. Just get on with it."

"I'm not going to kill you."

The commandant looked at Enele skeptically. "You promise on your ancestors' souls?"

Enele thought it an odd thing for him to say but went along with it. "I promise."

"All right, then. One thing I know about you people, when it comes to your ancestors, you Toovoos keep your promises. The weapons locker is down at the end of this hallway, and there's a full armory downstairs at the end of the corridor where you found us. You'll need my fingerprint to open it."

They first went down to the weapons locker. It held about twenty rifles, utility belts with radios, and grenades and ammunition. Enele, Adam, and Raphe put on utility belts, then upgraded their handguns to automatic weapons. "Nazil and Zeel are likely close by now," Enele said. He turned to the commandant. "How do we open the front gate?"

"There's a switch in the guard booth. Says 'open.' Can't miss it."

"Raphe," Enele said, handing him two radios. "Go open the compound gate. Give Nazil one of the radios and tell him to gather everyone together so we can arm them. Adam and I are going down to check the armory. Keep your radio on. I'll meet you out front."

"Yes, sir," Raphe said, running off down the hall.

As Enele, Adam, and the commandant started back downstairs, there was a sudden grenade explosion. "I guess they got themselves untied," Adam said. "Should have done as they were told."

The commandant led them past the still-smoking room to the other end of the corridor. The armory was a large, broad room almost identical to the armory on Hades, with all walls lined with weapons.

"We can use all that," Enele said.

"Like candy," Adam said.

Just then Enele's radio chirped. "Enele, this is Nazil. Can you hear me?"

Enele lifted his radio. "I'm here."

"I'm coming inside; we've got a problem."

"I'll be right up." He turned back. "Come on, Commandant. Let's get back up."

By the time they returned upstairs, Nazil had already entered the building with five of his original men. The grounds outside the

building were crowded with more than six hundred native Tuvaluans, men and women, who had worked the fields.

“What’s the problem?” Enele asked.

“They won’t fight.”

“What do you mean they won’t fight?”

Nazil’s face tightened. “They are cowards. They refuse to fight the Elgen.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Enele said.

“Just a minute,” Adam said. He ran back downstairs, returning with a bullhorn. “You’ll need this.”

Enele took the bullhorn, then walked outside, followed by the others. He lifted the bullhorn to his mouth. “Fellow Tuvaluans. The time has come for us to fight for our freedom and reclaim our country from the Elgen enemy. Now may be our only chance. What say you?”

No one answered. Then a young woman stepped to the front of the group. “You do not order us. We will not fight. Tuvaluan people are peaceful. We do not murder. We do not shed blood.”

“What do you know of the shedding of blood?” Enele said. He looked at her carefully. Enele knew many of the people in front of him but not this woman. “Who are you?”

The woman looked at him proudly, her chin up, her arms crossed at her chest. “I am Tabisha. And these people listen to me.”

“Where are you from, Tabisha?”

“I am a Tuvaluan citizen, if that’s what you’re getting at. I was born in Niulakita. But I was educated in Melbourne. I had just returned a year earlier when the Elgen came.”

Enele looked at her suspiciously. “Tabisha, why do you seem . . . better fed than the others?”

Her eyes narrowed. “We will not follow you.”

Enele again lifted the bullhorn. “Tabisha is right. Tuvaluan people are peaceful people. We do not provoke war. But neither do we accept the peace of slavery.”

“We don’t carry guns!” Tabisha shouted to the people, shaking her fists above her head. “If we act in violence, we are no better than them. We are only lowering ourselves to *their* level.”

“Lowering ourselves?” Enele said. “How much lower can you fall than slaves?” Enele looked at them with disgust. “What has become of you? Fools. You won’t carry arms? Then you’ll carry chains, and so will your children and grandchildren. That is the future and legacy you leave them. As for me, I will fight for my freedom and my future children’s freedom. And, though you don’t deserve it, I will fight for yours as well. Even if I must fight alone. But make no mistake. If you get in my way, I will treat you as the enemy.” He turned to walk away.

Then someone shouted, “I’ll fight with you!” A young man standing near the front of the group turned and looked back at the others. “Do you not remember what the Elgen did to us? To our elders? Our families? I’m not a coward. I’d rather lie in a grave than bend as a slave. Enele Saluni is right. You used to be men. You used to defend your women; now you hide behind their skirts. Go back to working your fields and to your hunger and fear, you cowards! You, with the hearts of slaves, you belong in the fields. Go back to kissing the Elgen feet.” He walked toward Enele. “I will fight with Enele. And, if need be, I will die with Enele.”

“As will I,” another man shouted.

Then two other women came forward. “We’re with Enele.”

Then an older woman shouted, “Tabisha is with the Elgen! Last week I saw her with one of the guards behind the compound. They were drinking wine. . . .”

“She’s lying!” Tabisha said. “That’s not true. I’ve made life easier for all of us.”

“Our life is easier?” the woman said. “Easier than what? You’ve made it easier for yourself.”

An elderly woman next to her crossed her arms. “Where were you the night before last, Tabisha? I waited for you. You know we are not allowed to leave our cages after dark. And yet, somehow you always do and somehow you are never punished. Where do you go?”

Tabisha looked around fearfully. “Who are you going to believe? I have attended the University of Melbourne. I have two degrees. I am educated; these common people are not.”

“Common!” a man shouted. “A college education does not make one wise; it just fills your head with others’ voices.” His voice lowered.

“I have often wondered why it is the Elgen don’t whip you when you stand around while we sweat.”

“She’s an educated *fool*,” shouted a man.

“She’s a traitor,” someone else shouted. “She’s with the Elgen!”

“She *is* an Elgen!”

Tabisha looked at the angry crowd gathering around, then suddenly ran off.

“Let her go,” Enele said. “She can’t do us any harm.” He looked at the young man who had started the small revolution. “What is your name?”

“Niko. I am the grandson of Malakani and Tevita, who have passed.”

Enele nodded. “I knew your grandparents. They would be proud of you.”

“Thank you, but I am not seeking honor, just freedom.”

“Which is why you deserve honor. Thank you for bringing these people to their senses.”

“How may I help?”

“I will need your help organizing these people. Do you know how many boats we have?”

“Right now there are four large shipping vessels docked.”

“How many people will they fit?”

“They are all different, but more than a hundred each. One will hold more than two hundred.”

“Are any of them military ships?”

“No. They are used for shipping food to the other islands.”

“That’s okay,” Enele said. “If there is still an army of Elgen on Vaitupu, it’s best they only see the arrival of a shipping boat. That will not cause suspicion. Who do we have who can pilot the boat?”

“We have many skilled boat captains. The best are Pita, Daniel, Jimi, Noa, and Pio.”

“Zeel, go with those five and whomever they choose to prepare the boats. Nazil, arrange the people who are willing to fight so we can arm them. Take as many soldiers as you need and retrieve our weapons from the boats.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Adam, gather fifty to help us distribute the compound weapons.”

Adam shouted, “I need fifty strong men and women to come with me to get weapons.”

More than fifty hurried up to the front of the building.

“Single file,” Enele said to Adam. “Give us a minute to prepare.” Then Enele and Raphe went back downstairs to the arms closet. A moment later the first of the fifty appeared. They loaded each worker with as much as he or she could carry, moving through a steady line until the entire arms room was emptied.

When Enele went back upstairs, Adam had all the weaponry, ammunition, and clothing, piled by type, on the ground in front of the building. As far as Enele could tell, nearly all the Tuvaluans had volunteered to fight.

“Who of you have experience in using a gun? Please come forward.”

Only two dozen from the group stepped forward.

“Okay. You are the patrol leaders. Each of you will select twenty-five soldiers to lead. As soon as Nazil returns with the others, we will begin arming you.”

Fifteen minutes later Nazil and his people came out from the trees, each carrying multiple weapons.

“If you can use your weapon, keep it,” Enele said. “Bring the rest up here.”

Within ten minutes the rest of the weapons were arranged and the squad leaders began arming their squads.

“This is good,” Enele said. “We are still few, but we know our islands. It’s time to sail for Vaitupu.”

PART THREE



5

Auxiliary Fuel

After the *Joule* had sailed more than sixty nautical miles from Hades, the COB said to Welch, “If I’m putting her on autopilot, I need to know where we’re going. Besides ‘south.’”

Jack and Zeus were sitting on either side of Welch, and they both turned to him.

“Panama,” Welch said.

The COB looked up from the controls. “We don’t have enough fuel to make it to Panama.”

“You’re lying,” Welch said. “This craft can carry enough diesel to cross the Pacific.”

“It can if it’s full. But we haven’t been refueled since we crossed over from Peru with the rest of the fleet. We were one day from refueling.”

“Show me.”

“The fuel gauge is here,” the COB said, tapping a small screen. Welch looked at the monitor. It had a blinking warning light that read: AUXILIARY FUEL.

“What about auxiliary reserve?” Welch said.

“We’re *on* auxiliary reserve. That’s why the light is blinking.”

“How far will our fuel get us?”

“About eight hundred nautical miles.”

“Can we make Fiji?”

“Yes. Fiji is about six hundred nautical miles.”

“What about New Zealand. Or Australia?”

“New Zealand is two thousand nautical miles, and Australia is about eight hundred nautical miles farther. We can make Fiji and refuel there.”

“There are still Elgen on Fiji. What other options do we have?”

“Samoa.”

“How far is that?”

“Almost the same distance as Fiji, but it won’t be any safer. There are almost as many Elgen, and we’d be more noticeable. I suggest we make Fiji, refuel, and then sail immediately to Australia, where we’ll have more opportunities to hide, which is to both of our benefit.”

Welch thought for a moment, then said to Zeus, “Get Taylor.”

“I think she went back to sleep.”

“Wake her. It will only take a few minutes.”

Zeus ran out of the room. A few minutes later he returned with Taylor behind him, her eyes puffy.

“I’m sorry I had to wake you,” Welch said. “But I need your help.”

“It’s okay. How can I help?”

“I need you to tell me if the captain here is telling the truth or not.” Welch looked at him. “We have a game here. I ask you a question. If you give me the wrong answer, you get shocked.”

“That would make a good TV show,” Zeus said. “Truth or . . . Electrocutation.”

One of the Elgen sailors nodded in agreement.

“What do you mean?” the COB asked.

“This young lady can read your mind. So, unless you want Zeus to shock the truth out of you, I suggest you tell the truth the first time.”

The COB looked at her warily. “I *was* telling the truth.”

“We’ll see,” Welch said. “Taylor?”

She stepped up to the COB, put her hands on his temples, and then turned to Welch. “I’m ready.”

Welch looked the COB in the eyes. “Do we have enough fuel to make Fiji?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do we have enough fuel to make New Zealand?”

“No, sir.”

Taylor nodded. “It’s true.”

“Set autocourse to Fiji,” Welch said.

The COB turned to his navigator. “Set course for Fiji.”

“Cruising depth?”

“Maintain.”

A moment later the man said, “Course is set.”

The COB turned back. “Our course is set.”

“Are the Elgen able to track us?”

“Yes,” the COB said.

“He’s telling the truth,” Taylor said.

“Is there any way to turn off tracking?”

“No.”

“He’s not telling the whole truth,” Taylor said.

“Zeus.”

“Wait,” the COB said, holding up his hands as if surrendering. Zeus had already shocked him twice in the taking of the boat, and the COB wasn’t eager to get shocked again. “I wasn’t trying to deceive you. What I meant was, you cannot turn it off from the control. You would have to manually destroy the GPS broadcaster. But it’s built into the circuitry. It would be nearly impossible to get to.”

Welch turned to Taylor.

“He’s telling the truth,” she said.

“*Nearly* impossible is still possible,” Welch said.

“It wasn’t meant to be deactivated, so there’s no way to get to it.”

“Could it be deactivated by an EMP?”

“If you wanted to put our entire computerized control system out of order.” He looked at Welch intensely. “Trust me, you don’t.”

Just then there was a crisp burst of static from the radio.

“What was that?” Welch asked.

The COB shook his head. “I don’t know. Some kind of interference.”

“A broadcast?”

“I hope not. The only broadcast we’d receive would be from EHQ. They’re the only ones who know these frequencies.”

After a moment Welch said to Taylor, “All right. Thank you. Go get some rest.”

Taylor walked out of the room.

Welch stood. “I’m going to my quarters. Zeus, take these men to bunk room two and lock them inside. Have Ian keep an eye on them.”

“Yes, sir.” Zeus turned to the men. “Let’s go.”

“Gladly,” the COB said.

After they were gone, Welch said, “Jack, I’m going to my cabin to sleep. You have the Conn.”

“Got it.”

“No Elgen are allowed in the Conn.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack said. “How long will you be out?”

“Just until I wake up. Or unless there’s a problem. Wake me if there’s anything irregular.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack said.

Welch started out of the Conn, then turned back. “I suggest you don’t touch anything.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Good. I’d hate to end up back at Hades by mistake.” He turned and walked out of the room.



6

Only a Dream

Several hours after Taylor had gone back to sleep, she bolted up in bed, as if someone had woken her. Suddenly, in the dark room, there was a bright light floating above her, flickering like a projection. The light was in the shape of a person. The image was hazy but grew in intensity and clarity until she thought she recognized who it was.

“Michael!” she screamed.

The image flickered, then disappeared.

“Tay?” McKenna said hoarsely, dimly illuminating her index finger to light the room. “Taylor?”

Abigail also woke. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you have a bad dream?” McKenna asked.

Taylor was shaking. McKenna got up, standing to the side of Taylor’s bunk. “What’s wrong?”

When Taylor could speak, she said, “I just saw Michael.”

McKenna glanced over at Abigail and frowned.

“It was only a dream, honey,” Abigail said.

Taylor started crying. “No. I was awake. I really saw him. I did.”

For a moment, neither McKenna nor Abigail knew what to say. Ostin sat up, mumbled something, then went back to sleep.

"I'm not crazy," Taylor said.

"We know you're not," McKenna said.

"No one said you're crazy," Abigail said.

Taylor looked at them with tear-filled eyes. ". . . But you're thinking it."

Just then Tara also sat up. "You okay, Sis?"

"She thinks she saw Michael," McKenna said.

Abigail got out of her bunk, walked over to Taylor's bed, and knelt down next to it. "I believe you saw him."

Taylor wiped her eyes. "You do?"

Abigail nodded. "Jack told me that after Wade died, he kept hearing Wade's voice. Once he said he was sure he saw him. Grief does strange things to the mind. It happens."

"I didn't make it up," Taylor said. "I saw him!" She began to cry again. "I *think* I saw him. I don't think I made it up."

"Taylor, you and I both know how the mind can fool itself," Tara said.

Taylor wiped her eyes again, then looked at her sister. "Can you give me Michael?"

"What?"

"Just for a minute."

"Tay . . . please don't ask me to do that."

"I know you can do it."

"It's not . . . right. It's not healthy."

"Please."

Abigail and McKenna both glanced back and forth between them, and McKenna lightly shook her head.

Tara finally said, "All right." She got out of her bunk and stood a few feet in front of her twin. Suddenly she looked exactly like Michael, though she looked at her sister with sad eyes.

Taylor began sobbing. "Stop. Okay, stop. You were right."

Tara took Taylor in her arms. "I'm so sorry. It's not fair. It's just not fair."

"That was really wrong," McKenna said.

Abigail nodded. "Yeah. But I probably would have asked too if it had been Jack."

PART FOUR



Battle of Vaitupu

The rising early morning sea was calmer than Enele's heart as the northwestern Vaitupu harbor came into view. He led the four-boat armada aboard the *ES Regulator*, the largest of the Elgen shipping boats, along with two hundred and fifty Tuvaluans, only sixty of whom were armed. They were followed at a short distance by the three other ships they'd commandeered from Demeter: the *ES Pulse*, the *ES Proton*, and the *ES Neutron*.

Unlike Hades and Demeter, Vaitupu—renamed Ares by Admiral-General Hatch, after the Greek god of war—was technically not an island, but rather was an atoll, a ring-shaped coral reef consisting of nine isles. It was the largest of the six Tuvaluan atolls and had the second-largest population in Tuvalu, only smaller than the Tuvaluan capital of Funafuti.

Seagulls circled the ship, and to the east the sun was rising like fire from the Pacific Ocean. Enele sat in the control deck next to Adam and the ship's captain, Noa.

"How long until we reach the dock?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes," Noa said.

He turned to Adam. "Are the troops ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are they mentally ready?"

"We'll find out soon enough."

Suddenly the radio chirped. "ES *Regulator*, this is Ares Dock. We have no authorization for your docking."

The radioman looked over at the captain. "What should I do?"

Captain Noa turned to Enele. "Sir?"

"Ignore it," Enele said. "Prepare to dock." Enele grabbed the mic for the boat's PA system. "This is Enele, your commander. We have reached Vaitupu and are about to dock. First-wave soldiers on deck, armed and prepared to attack. Second- and third-wave soldiers remain inside on level two and wait for further instruction. Everyone keep low, especially those soldiers on deck. Do not be seen until I give the signal. Do not fire unless commanded. Expect hostility."

As the *Regulator* sidled up to the Vaitupu dock, they were met by an armed Elgen officer and six other dockworkers. The officer was wearing the Elgen insignia beneath two stripes, the markings of an Elgen naval lieutenant. He walked up to the starboard side of the ship and lifted a bullhorn to his mouth. "You're not scheduled to dock here, *Regulator*. Pull away now or face consequences."

"We just lost a war," Enele shouted over the side of the boat. "No one is scheduled anywhere. You haven't heard?"

The officer looked at him suspiciously, then, lifting a radio, said, "I'm going to have to check with EHQ for authorization."

"Drop that," Enele said, pointing a gun at the officer and simultaneously giving his soldiers the signal. Two dozen Tuvaluan soldiers rose up over the side of the boat, their rifles aimed on the dockworkers. "You just got your authorization. Pull us in now, or we'll blow you apart and do it ourselves."

The officer hesitated, then said, "Pull them in."

The Elgen dockworkers pulled the boat in, lashing her to the dock's cleats.

"Shoot anyone who tries to leave the dock," Enele shouted to his men, loud enough for the Elgen to hear. "Adam, tell the captain to open the starboard port door and signal the other boats to dock. I

want you to lead the first wave out. Take the dock, commandeer all communications, and establish a hundred-yard perimeter.”

“Yes, sir.”

A large metal door opened on the starboard side of the ship, and the *Regulator* crew lowered a gangplank from the boat. Twenty Tuvaluan soldiers dressed in Elgen uniforms were the first to storm out of the ship. Behind them came the rest of the *Regulator*’s soldiers.

As the other boats moved up behind the *Regulator*, Enele went belowdecks and disembarked. He walked up to the dock’s main building. The Elgen officer he’d been talking to had already been cuffed and bound and was sitting on the ground with three other Elgen. Two armed Tuvaluans in uniform stood to either side of them.

“How many Elgen on the island?” Enele asked.

The Elgen officer looked at the other Elgen, then said, “I’m not talking.”

Enele looked him in the eye. “What’s your name?”

The officer scowled. “Earl.”

“Earl,” Enele repeated. “That’s an American Southern name, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you from in America?”

“Jackson, Louisiana.”

“I only know that name because of that country song. ‘Earl had to die.’ Clever song.” Enele said to one of the Tuvaluan soldiers, “Take these men inside. Leave Earl with me.”

“Get going,” the soldiers said, one of them pushing the closest Elgen with his foot. The Elgen struggled to their feet, then walked off.

“So does Earl have to die?” Enele said, taking an Elgen Taser prod from his utility belt. He knelt down and put the Taser on Earl’s neck.

“How many Elgen are on the island?”

Earl just swallowed. Enele didn’t wait two seconds to push the Taser’s button. The sound of arcing electricity filled the air, and the officer’s frozen body fell to the side. He groaned out in pain.

“I know that hurts,” Enele said. “Do you want to guess how I know? Because your Elgen buddies used to do that to us every day in Hades. In fact, they especially liked to do it to us when we were in the

shower. Yeah, that was hilarious.” Enele pushed the Taser button again, and the man stiffened and groaned.

“You can’t make me talk,” he said.

“Earl, you’re so brave,” Enele said. “Stupid, but just so . . . brave. So let me tell you what I’m going to do.” He moved the electric prod to Earl’s face. “After I’m done shocking you a few hundred times, and if your heart holds out, I’m going to tie a rope to your feet and hang you from one of those cleats, just a few feet above the waterline, then let the tide slowly drown you. And, while all that fun’s going on, I’m going to bring out one of your other men, show them you, and then make them the exact same offer. I’m pretty sure that one of them will tell us everything. So, you can tell me what I need to know, or you can die a slow, painful, and very worthless death, since it will accomplish nothing.” At that, Enele again pushed the electric prod’s button. This time Earl screamed out.

“I wonder what it would feel like to have your eye at the center of all that voltage,” he said. He moved the prod to Earl’s right eye.

“I’ll talk,” he said.

Enele moved the prod away from Earl’s face. “I thought you might come to your senses. Just so we’re clear now, if you so much as stutter, we’ll test the eye thing, and then you’re shark bait. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“Say ‘yes, sir.’”

“Yes, sir.”

“How many Elgen are on the island?”

“Just a handful. Sir. Hatch called almost everyone off to the battle.”

“Why?”

“Who knows why? He called it real-world training.”

“How many is ‘a handful’?”

“Maybe thirty, including us. But they’re mostly the office workers.”

“Where are the office workers now?”

“They’re in the main headquarters.”

“Where’s the headquarters?”

“It’s about two hundred yards from here. There’s a map of the island inside the office.”

“What weapons do they have?”

“They have thousands of weapons. It’s the Elgen’s armory.”

“Where do they keep the weapons?”

“The main armory is in the south wing of the HQ.”

“How many armories are there?”

“There’s one in almost every main building. The explosives have their own building behind the HQ. The office workers didn’t want to store them where they worked.”

“Of course,” Enele said, nodding. “How do we get into the headquarters?”

“They’ll see you. There are cameras everywhere.”

“You’re Elgen. There are always cameras everywhere.”

“They haven’t been as vigilant watching. With everyone gone, things have been a bit lax. I think there’s been a lot of drinking going on.”

“We’ve noticed that.” Enele stood. “Adam, take Earl on board with the other Elgen prisoners. Then get back here. Tell your men we’re going to attack in fifteen minutes.”



Fish in a Barrel

When Adam returned, he was directed inside the dock house by the soldier guarding the door. Enele had already gathered the other leaders around the map of the island and was writing on it.

“Back, sir,” Adam said.

“Good. I’ll start again from the beginning. Surprise and speed are vital to our success. The last thing we want is a handful of men hunkered down for a week in the building. Zeel, I want you to march the men from your boat and position here, east of the HQ.” Enele moved his pencil down the side of the map. “Split your group; have half the men take the explosives armory behind the main building.” He looked up at Nazil. “How many of your men are armed?”

“About sixty.”

“I want you to take your soldiers and position them here, at the west side. I want you in behind me. We’ll send word.

“Me, Raphe, Adam, and all our men in Elgen uniforms will drive up through the front gate. If we’re lucky, they’ll think we’re just soldiers returning from the battle. We’ll leave fifty of my men here to hold the dock.

“Do not fire until you’ve been fired upon or you hear gunfire. This is a surprise attack. If we can do this without firing a shot, we’re better off. Our pigeon said that the Elgen they left behind are mostly paper pushers, not fighters. They might not fight unless they think they have to. But don’t count on them going peacefully. They are still Elgen.

“After we’ve taken the building, we’ll pull the trucks up and load them with every weapon they’ve got. We’ll put all the explosives on one boat.”

“Which boat?” Nazil asked.

“The one farthest from mine,” Enele said. Everyone looked at him, and a sudden, unexpected smile crossed his face. “I was kidding. What’s our smallest boat?”

“Mine,” said Pio, one of the four boat captains. “The *Neutron*.”

“How many passengers are you carrying?”

“Forty-six. Six crew.”

“We can take your soldiers on the *Regulator*. We’ll fill the *Neutron* with the heavy explosives and your crew. Grenades and mortar shells we’ll divide between the rest.” Enele looked around. “Any questions?”

No one said anything.

“Let’s do this. Have your men ready to move in five minutes. My team won’t make our entrance until everyone’s in place.”

Zeel held up a handheld radio. “We got these. Should we use them?”

“No. From here, those are powerful enough to reach Funafuti, and we don’t know who’s listening. We go in radio silence.”

Enele and his men waited ten minutes for the other squads to take their positions before driving the dock trucks up to the Elgen’s main building. The front gate was attended by only one guard. As they approached, the man stood at attention.

“You made it back, sir,” he said.

“Barely,” Enele said.

The guard looked at him, then at his badge. “You aren’t Collins.”

“No, I’m not,” Enele said, lifting his pistol at the man. Three of his soldiers pointed their guns at the man as well. “Hands on your head,” Enele said. “Speak into that radio, and we blow your mouth off.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir.”

“On your knees.”

“Yes, sir.”

Two men, Adam and one other, jumped down from the truck and went inside the guard booth. They cuffed the guard’s hands behind his back, then took his radio. Then they went through the booth, confiscating all the weapons inside.

“Sir,” Adam said. “We can see inside the building from here.”

Enele climbed down from the truck and walked around it to the guard booth. There were four different monitors on the wall, all of them switching camera views every few seconds.

“Right there,” Adam said. “They’re in those two offices.”

“And the break room,” Enele said. “They’re playing Ping-Pong.”

After a moment Adam said, “They’re not very good.”

Enele laughed. “Earl wasn’t kidding, was he? It looks like a bunch of accountants.”

“What kind of uniform is that?” Adam said, pointing at one of the monitors. “It looks . . . wimpy.”

“So far I haven’t seen a single weapon.”

“That guy has one,” Adam said, pointing at the screen. He leaned forward to read the small type across the bottom of the image. “That must be the explosives armory.” He turned back. “Should we warn Zeel?”

“Not for one guy. They’ll handle him.” Enele started back to the Jeep. “Let’s go catch us some Elgen.”

“Like fish in a barrel,” Adam said.

“Elgen fish,” Enele said. “They stink more.”

* * *

Only one Elgen even noticed Enele and his men as they entered the building. He wore thick glasses and was carrying a stack of papers.

“It’s about time you got back,” he said. “It’s gone to pot around here. Literally.”

Enele pointed his gun at him. “On your stomach, hands behind your back.”

“What?”

“Do it. Now.”

The man dropped to his stomach. Two soldiers ran to him, cuffed him, and dragged him out of the hall.

“Raphe, find Nazil. Tell him we’re in the building.”

Raphe nodded.

“. . . And don’t surprise them. You might get shot.”

“Check.” He turned and ran out the front door.

Enele split up his men, and they went separately down opposite corridors.

“This should be the room on the monitor,” Adam whispered.

Enele put his ear up against the door, looked back, and nodded.

Adam signaled for his men to line up behind the door, then turned back to Enele. Before Enele could open the door, the knob turned and began to open. They let the door open enough to expose a sloppily dressed, middle-aged man holding a porcelain coffee cup. His eyes were dull and his face was remarkably calm as he stared at the Tuvaluans in Elgen uniforms. He looked more confused than worried.

“Now!” Enele shouted, kicking open the door and knocking the man onto his butt. Coffee flew everywhere. Adam and his men ran into the room, brandishing their rifles. “Everyone, hands up. Now.”

The men inside the room watched the intrusion as casually as if they were watching a TV show.

“Up!” Adam shouted.

The men slowly raised their hands.

“What’s the meaning of this?” one of the men asked, his voice soft and slightly slurred.

“Hands on your head! Mouth shut!” Enele said.

The man looked back and forth between the Tuvaluans, lifted a drink to his mouth, and then said, “Thank God, you’re just Tuvaluan. For a moment I thought Admiral-General Hatch had sent you.”

Their behavior was so peculiar that Enele walked over to see what they were drinking. He held up a cup. “Kava Kava.”

The Tuvaluans nodded knowingly.

“Kava,” Adam said. “That explains everything.”

* * *

Enele's soldiers lined the men up, checked them for weapons (the only thing anyone had resembling a weapon was a letter opener), cuffed them, and then put them all into a closet and locked it.

"You're going to let us out eventually?" the last man into the closet said.

"Eventually," Enele said.

"I rather need to use the water closet. That's where I was going when you barged in."

Enele left one man to guard the closet, then went back out into the hallway. One of their soldiers was bringing a man back from the bathroom. "Found this guy in there."

"Put him in the closet with the others."

"Enele," someone shouted.

Enele looked down the hallway. Raphe had returned with Nazil. The two men came down the hallway after him.

"What's going on?" Nazil asked.

"Only thirty on the island. We just locked up a roomful of krunked accountants."

"Krunked? You mean drunk on kava?"

Enele nodded. "They were more afraid I was Elgen than Tuvaluan."

"Not surprising," Raphe said. "Hatch would have them fed to rats."

"When the cat's away, the mice play," Nazil said. "What do you want us to do?"

"Check the rest of the rooms throughout the building," Enele said, stopping outside a door. "Adam and I will take this one."

Nazil's forehead furrowed. "What's that sound?"

Enele grinned. "Ping-Pong."



9

The Mother Lode

Hatch had wildly underestimated the Electroclan and had never considered the battle of Hades as anything more than an easy victory and practice for his soldiers. War games. In this he had left himself wide open. Had Enele and his Tuvaluans arrived before the battle, they would have met the fiercest, best-trained squads of Elgen in the world. They wouldn't have even made it off the dock. They wouldn't have made it off the boat. But that was before the battle. Now the most opposition the Elgen put up was when one of the soldiers was hit in the face with a Ping-Pong paddle.

It took Enele less than an hour to secure the whole of the Elgen's war headquarters, with only one shot fired. They forced the guard stationed inside the armory to open the room, which wasn't hard once Enele threatened to blow up the room with the man still inside.

Inside the armory Enele couldn't believe what he saw. The room was more than a hundred feet long and fifty feet wide, with racks of guns and munition filling the room. "This is more than we can use," he said to Adam. "This could equip an army."

"Two of them," Adam said. "What do you think it's all for?"

“It’s more than they needed for Tuvalu. Before Hatch came, we had less than two dozen guns in the whole nation. He’s arming up for his next conquest.”

“What should we do with it?”

“Take it all. We can drop what we don’t need into the sea.”

Enele had his men back the trucks up to the front door and began loading them up with weapons. They created a chain of more than a hundred Tuvaluans as Enele and Adam walked through the room, directing what weapons should be moved first. A half hour later Zeel walked into the armory. “We’ve secured the explosives armory.”

“Any trouble? I heard a gunshot.”

“No trouble,” Zeel said, looking slightly embarrassed. “That was one of my men dropping his rifle. He was inexperienced. What do you want me to do with the explosives?”

“What did you find?”

“Half the room was filled with grenades, mortar shells, land mines, and munitions. The other half was filled with heavy stuff. C4. Blasting caps. Slurry. Even some dynamite. There’s enough in there to make a very big hole in the world.”

“Take your men and one of the trucks and start transporting the heavy explosives to the *Neutron*. Leave the land mines but take all the ammo, grenades, and shells and leave them on the dock with the other weapons. Do you have anyone who knows anything about explosives?”

“Just the Elgen guy who was working there.”

“Will he cooperate?”

“I think so. He says he has a secret Tuvaluan girlfriend on Nui.”

“Have him help you, but have two guards on him at all times. Let him know that you’ll shoot him if he tries anything.”

“Yes, sir.”

Only a few minutes after Zeel walked out of the armory, Raphe walked back in. “We’ve already filled the first truck.”

“We haven’t even made a dent in this,” Enele said. “Take everything to the dock and unload it in organized piles, then come back for more. Don’t put anything on the boats yet. We’ll do that after we know where we want everything.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Pass the word on to Nazil and the others.”

“Yes, sir.”

Adam frowned. “This is going to take us all day.”

“That sounded like a complaint,” Enele said. “That’s like complaining because you got too much for Christmas.”

“Sorry,” Adam said.

Enele put his hand on Adam’s shoulder. “We were wondering if we’d find any weapons. I’d say we hit the mother lode.”

* * *

It took three hundred men nearly five hours to clear out the armories. When Enele drove back to the dock, he was surprised to see just how much they had confiscated. Stretched out in the open, it looked like a military flea market.

Zeel walked up to him. “We’ve filled the *Neutron* with the heavy explosives. The rest we’ve piled over there.”

“Good,” Enele said.

“Not for the crew,” Zeel said. “That’s one nervous group of men. Sterling told them there were enough explosives on board to blow up a third of Funafuti.”

“Sterling?”

“He’s the Elgen.”

“That’s good to know,” Enele said.

“Again, not good for the crew.”

Enele grinned. “Just tell them that if the C4 explodes, they’ll never even know. But if they suddenly find themselves on a beautiful island with perfect weather and fine hula dancers—just relax. They’re already dead.”

Zeel grinned back. “I’ll let them know.”

“How’s your Elgen? Sterling.”

“He’s swapping stories with the men.”

“Just keep your eye on him. Nazil!”

Nazil had just arrived at the dock and was climbing out of a truck. He walked up to Enele. “Yes, sir.”

“We need to get the boats loaded before dark. Have each soldier arm himself with the best weapons he can find. Have them take a utility belt, grenades, and ammunition as well. I want them armed and prepared to fight.”

“Yes, sir.”

“After they’ve armed themselves, have them secure their weapons and then start transporting the rest of the weaponry and ammo to the ships. Adam and Raphe will oversee the distribution.”

“Yes, sir.” He looked puzzled. “We leave for Funafuti tonight?”

“No. Our men need rest. And food. When they’re done, send your men back to the headquarters to eat. I’ll order their chefs to cook for us.”

“We can trust the Elgen chefs?”

“I should hope so. They’re Tuvaluan.”

* * *

The sun was setting in the western Pacific as Enele watched the men close up the last doors on the ships.

“It’s done, sir,” Adam said. “The ships are full.”

“Well done. Let’s get us something to eat.”

“Thank you.”

They drove the last truck over to headquarters. Most of the men had already eaten, and some were out in the yard, shouting and laughing.

“What’s going on over there?” Enele asked.

“Looks like sport,” Adam said.

They pulled up outside a wide circle of men. In the clearing were two Elgen stripped down to their underwear, fist fighting.

“What’s going on?” Enele asked.

“Just having a little fun,” one of the men said. “We put wagers down on who’s the better fighter. The loser gets fed to the rats.”

Enele flashed with anger. “Stop this.” He pointed at the two men, who were both bloodied. One of them had a broken nose. “Elgen, stop this right now.”

The men gladly obeyed.

Enele turned back to face his own men. "What are you, Elgen? This is not us. We are here to liberate our islands from the Elgen, not to become them. Do you wish to offend the gods? Go to your boats. Now!"

The group quickly dissipated, all except one, whom Enele ordered to stay and gather up the men's clothes. Enele walked up to the two Elgen men. He threw them their clothes. "Get dressed." The men looked at him with surprise. "We are not uncivilized," Enele said. "We leave that to you." He turned to the soldier he'd kept back. "Take them back inside where you got them."

"Yes, sir."

Adam looked at him. "They were just releasing tension, sir. They may be killing Elgen soon enough. Or being killed."

"I know." He started to the building. "There are worse things that could happen."

"Sir?"

Enele stopped, then said, "After slavery was abolished in America, many Africans were returned to their own country. Instead of returning to their way of life, they imitated the cruel world they had left and began capturing and enslaving other Africans."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm worried that we might not get the Elgen out of our islands. But I am far more worried that, after the cruelty our people have suffered, we might not get the Elgen out of our people."



10

Evil to Come

The compound's mess hall was designed to seat a thousand Elgen soldiers and was easily large enough to accommodate the small Tuvaluan force. The room was dull and gray, but the emotion was bright and festive. The Tuvaluan cooks were happy to be with their own people again, and they joyfully cooked the traditional foods they were not usually allowed to make: cassava, boiled tapioca, curry, and stew with fish and beef. They made special Tuvaluan bread and cakes and dipped into the Elgen's best butter, wine, and cream. They also cooked large, meaty steaks imported from New Zealand that had been reserved for the Elgen officers. They made enough food to provide the soldiers with as much as they could eat and some to take away.

Enele walked among his soldiers, observing them and shouting, "Eat up. The next feast you have will be on free Tuvaluan soil."

After the small army had eaten, Enele told the cooks to eat their fill and then to prepare as much bread and food as they could for the coming days of battle. All the cooks volunteered to follow Enele into battle. They took about seventy-five soldiers and ransacked the Elgen's

food supplies, filling the trucks with the Elgen's food and bottled water.

After Enele had eaten, he gathered his leaders together. The men were in high spirits—a few of them high on spirits.

“We are an unstoppable force,” Nazil said, lifting a glass of wine. “We have put down the Elgen.”

“We put down thirty drunk accountants,” Enele said grimly, angry to see his men so quickly off guard. “Drink no more.”

Nazil set his glass down. “Sorry, sir.”

“When do we sail to Funafuti?” Adam asked.

Enele paused a moment, then said, “We're not sailing to Funafuti.”

The men looked at him in disbelief.

“You're joking with us, Enele,” Raphe said.

“I don't joke about serious matters. We're not sailing to Funafuti. We're sailing to Nui.”

The men looked back and forth at one another. “Nui?” Zeel said, not hiding his disapproval. “Why would we sail to Nui? That is the opposite direction. It's time we attacked. We have soldiers. We have found more weapons and ammunition than we hoped for. Our people need us. It is *time*.”

“I will tell you when it is *time*,” Enele said. “Yes, our people need us. Our country needs us. But this is not our way. We are sailing to Nui.”

The men glanced furtively at one another with concern.

“Excuse me, sir,” Adam said. “But what is not our way?”

Enele took a deep breath. “I have just learned that the great Elder Malakai is still alive and residing on the island of Nui. We will not go to battle until we have counseled with him.”

“Enele,” Zeel said. “I beg you to please reconsider. This change of course could delay us three or four days. Any delay gives the Elgen more time to build up strength. Just a few minutes ago the cooks told us that new Elgen soldiers are arriving on Funafuti every day. They are growing in strength. Soon our window of advantage will be gone.”

Enele looked disturbed. “I know the risk,” he said. “This was originally not my plan. But my heart has guided me correctly so far. I feel that this is something we must do.”

“But, Enele,” Nazil said. “We—”

Enele abruptly stood. "This is not a matter open to discussion. We will set sail at four a.m. Have your soldiers ready." He turned and walked out of the room, leaving the men sitting in stunned silence.

"Adam," Zeel said. "Go after him. He listens to you. You must talk sense to him."

"I'll do what I can," Adam said. He got up and ran out the door after him.

When he reached Enele's side, Enele said, "You wish to discuss the matter more?"

"You said this is not a matter open to discussion," Adam said.

"But you would if I allowed," Enele said. "Or perhaps the group sent you to reason with me. Why else would you run to catch up with me?"

"Yes, they asked me to speak to you. But that is not why I ran after you. I ran to you because it is not wise that the leader of our nation walk alone, in the dark, on enemy ground."

Enele stopped and looked at him. "Thank you. But this is not enemy ground. This is our home."

"It *was* our home," Adam said.

"Exactly. And it will be again." Enele's voice softened. "I do value your advice. What would you like to say about my change in plans?"

Adam looked down uncomfortably, then back up into Enele's eyes. "I have such respect for you. Always. So please, if what I say is foolishness, just tell me and I will own it."

"Speak," Enele said.

"I would like to say that I would never disagree with you in front of the others, but it seems to me that Zeel was right. Every day brings added danger. Every day the Elgen grow stronger. The gods have blessed us with great weapons and people willing to fight. So between us, as friends, as my leader, are you sure this change of course is right?"

Enele was silent for a moment, then said, "No. In this crazy new world, I am sure about few things. But I am sure about the wisdom of our elders." Enele looked Adam in the eyes. "I have always considered you wise for your age. But still, you are young in years, so there is much you don't know about this world, even in our small corner of it."

“Many years ago, at the inauguration ceremony of my grandfather, there was, as is our custom, a great celebration. For six days we ate our traditional foods and laughed and danced. There was much wine and yaqona. After nearly a week everyone was . . .”

“Happy?” Adam said.

A slight smile bent Enele’s lips. “. . . wasted.”

Adam laughed.

“Not me, of course. I was only eight years old. But during those days I noticed that the Elder Malakai was not celebrating with everyone else. He alone was solemn and grim. I don’t know why it bothered me so, but it did. I took him a glass of wine to drink, but he said, ‘I will not partake.’ I said, ‘You do not drink to my grandfather?’ He replied, ‘I do not celebrate.’ His words angered me. ‘Then you do not accept my grandfather as our new leader?’ ‘That is not why I do not celebrate,’ he said. ‘Your grandfather is a great man. And I mourn for him.’ ‘Mourn?’ I said. ‘Why would you mourn?’ He looked at me and said, ‘There is evil to come in this world. Evil without a name. Evil that will, in time, reach even our small islands. It is that I mourn. For what begins with a crown will end with a cage.’”

Adam’s jaw dropped. “He really said that?”

“It’s not something I would ever forget. After that, for the longest time I didn’t like Elder Malakai. But my grandfather respected him, so my grandfather often invited him to our home for the annual festivities. I, having wise parentage, showed the elder due respect, but I avoided talking to him or being with him.

“Many years later, on the night of the Tuvalu Independence Day, Elder Malakai said, ‘Enele, come to me. We must talk.’ I obeyed uncomfortably. He looked at me for what seemed a long time. Then he said, ‘You do not like me.’

“I started to make some excuse about why I never talked to him, when he raised his hand. ‘Do not add deceit to your troubled heart. You do not like me because many years ago I shared with you unhappy news. Listen carefully to me now. It does not matter to me whether you like me or not. I like you, and that is enough. So I wish to give you this wisdom. If you love only those who give you happy news, you will never love those worthy of your trust. For those who

love you will speak truth, and truth is not always happy, but it is always a blessing.' He then smiled and patted me on the back. 'You are a good boy, Enele. A strong boy. You will bless your people someday. In your hands you hold the future of our nation.'" Enele took a deep breath, then looked into Adam's eyes. "So, my friend, what do you think I should do?"

"I think we should sail to Nui as soon as possible."

Enele smiled and put his arm around the young man. "I thought you might agree. Now let's get some sleep. Tomorrow comes far too soon."

PART FIVE



11

Hatch Arrives

The life pod that Hatch and twelve crewmen had taken when escaping from the sinking *Faraday* was no speedboat. On smooth seas she could only reach speeds of twelve knots. But with stormy seas and a fair headwind that blew them off course, they were slowed considerably and it took nearly twenty-six hours for the boat and its occupants to reach the island of Nike.

When they reached the island, everyone on board the pod was ill and the floor was wet and sticky with seawater and vomit. Hatch was apoplectic. All but Hatch and three of his guards had been blinded by the flash, and the helplessness and moaning of his men only added to his rage.

As the pod approached Nike, the men working the dock were surprised to see them. They had expected large boats returning, not a single escape pod. They pulled the vessel in tight, securing it to the dock's cleats. They were even more surprised when they discovered that Admiral-General Hatch was one of the pod's occupants.

Hatch practically burst from the pod, closely followed by the three guards who still had their eyesight. "Get me out of this puke," he

growled. He had ample reasons to be furious. In addition to losing his ship and armies and having to endure the long, uncomfortable journey to Nike, he was also afraid. He was afraid because he was vulnerable. If the Tuvaluan natives decided to reclaim their islands right then, he could be overrun before help arrived.

“Get us to the plant,” he shouted to the first dockworker he saw. “Now.”

“What about the others on board?” the dockworker asked.

Hatch ignored the question.

“You’re going to have to come back for them,” one of the guards answered. “They’re blind.”

The men looked back and forth at one another. “Where should we take them?”

“Take them to the plant,” Hatch said. “We’ll find something to do with them.”

“Rat food,” one of the dock men mumbled.

Within minutes an olive-green Hummer pulled up to the dock. Hatch and his three guards climbed in, then sped off to the Starxource plant. The gates opened as they approached, and the Hummer didn’t stop until it had pulled past a raised metal door of the plant, which shut immediately behind them. Hatch climbed out of the car. As he walked inside the plant, he was greeted by EGG Amon and EGG Grant.

“Welcome back, sir. It’s good to see you.”

“Come with me,” Hatch said.

As he followed Hatch down the corridor, Amon said, “We lost all radio contact. What is the status of the siege?”

Hatch turned and scowled. “The *status* is that our forces were decimated.”

The EGG looked at him blankly. “How did that come about?”

“Somehow Vey went supernova and exploded himself like a nuclear bomb. He wiped out everything.” Then he said in a softer tone, as if to himself, “At least Vey is gone.”

“How many men did we lose?”

“Everyone. As far as I know, we’re the only survivors. Which means we’re vulnerable. We need to rally our guards to the plant.

Immediately. I want our forces brought in immediately from Fiji, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Leave only enough men to guard the plants. I want the Lung Li here. Contact the Philippine Navy. I want the *Joule* refueled and out to sea immediately.”

The EGG swallowed. “I have news regarding the *Joule*, sir.”

Hatch’s eyes narrowed, as if daring the EGG to give more bad news. “What?”

“The *Joule* has been hijacked. We picked up the crew two hours ago.”

Hatch erupted. “Hijacked?! By whom?”

“The traitor Welch and the Glows.”

Hatch’s face turned so red, the EGG feared his general might suffer an aneurism.

“How many guards do we have on this island?”

“Twenty-eight, sir. That includes the *Joule*’s crew and those in the center guarding the cages.”

“We’ll deal with the *Joule*’s crew later. How many nonmilitary personnel do we have on the island?”

“Including scientists?”

“Every last man and woman.”

“Thirty-six, sir.”

“That leaves us sixty-four plus the five of us. Secure the compound. Electrify all fences to lethal levels. I don’t care whether they’ve ever touched a gun or not, I want everyone armed and loaded in case the natives revolt. There will be complete radio silence. There is to be no mention on air of what has happened; we can’t afford to let this information slip out. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The natives probably don’t know we’re exposed. Let’s keep it that way.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are Bryan and Kylee?”

“In their quarters, sir.”

“Send them to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hatch turned to leave.

“Where are you going now, sir?”

“To get back my boat.”

PART SIX



12

Self-Destruct

There were three quick bursts of static on the *Joule's* radio, followed by a sustained voiceless transmission.

"Is that normal?" Jack asked Zeus. It had been seven hours since Welch had gone to bed, and Jack and Zeus were still sitting at the *Joule's* controls. Everyone else except Kiki had come up to the Conn as well.

"How would I know?" Zeus said. He turned to Ostin.

"No idea," Ostin said. "Proprietary."

"Whatever that means," Jack said. "I don't want to wake Welch."

"We could call the radio guy," Zeus said.

"Welch said no Elgen allowed in the Conn."

"So, we keep him outside the door. He steps inside, I'll drop him."

Jack thought a moment. "All right. You and Ian go get him."

"Okay," Zeus said.

About two minutes later they returned with the radioman. He looked like they had woken him, which they had.

"You sent for me, sir?"

Jack looked at him. “There were just three loud blasts from the radio. Is that normal?”

“No, sir,” the radioman said. “That would mean someone was trying to contact us. But that’s impossible.”

“Why is that impossible?”

“No one knows the frequencies except EHQ.”

“EHQ?” Jack said.

“Elgen Headquarters.”

There was another burst of static. Then an amber light started flashing on the control board.

“What’s that?” Jack asked.

The man looked afraid. “That’s a problem.”

“Why?”

“We’re being hailed by Elgen command.”

Jack pushed a button on the panel next to him. “Welch, it’s Jack. We’ve got a problem.”

“I’ll be right there,” Welch said.

A minute later Welch walked into the room. Jack stood, and Welch took the captain’s seat. “What’s going on?”

“The Elgen HQ is trying to contact us,” the radioman said.

“Get the COB.”

“He’s on his way,” Jack said.

“I’m here,” the COB said, walking into the Conn. “What’s going on?”

“EHQ transmission,” the radioman said. “Emergency frequency.”

The COB turned to Welch. “Someone at Elgen Headquarters wants to talk to us.”

“All right,” Welch said. “Let’s find out who. Open communications.”

Hatch’s voice suddenly burst over the *Joule’s* radio. “This is Admiral-General Hatch. To those who have hijacked the *Joule*, you cannot escape. We are tracking your movements. You have ten minutes to turn my boat around, or I will detonate the self-destruct.” His voice changed to somewhat less official. “What were you thinking, Welch? You fool.”

“Good try, Jimmy,” Welch said, knowing how much Hatch hated it when people didn’t call him by one of his self-appointed titles. “First,

may I tell you how genuinely disappointing it is to learn that you're still alive. Second, I don't take orders from you anymore. And third, I don't believe you have a self-destruct mechanism. What sane man would put a self-destruct mechanism on a boat? Especially one that's carrying all your money. Not that the word 'sane' has ever applied to you."

"There is a self-destruct," the COB frantically mouthed to Welch. Welch glanced at him but didn't say a word.

"A *brilliant* man," Hatch said. "Especially on one carrying all my money. There are pirates in this world, and I, having foresight, *as well as sanity*, have prepared for fools like you. The *Joule* is carrying more than two billion dollars in jewels, currency, and bullion. I can sink it and salvage the treasure later. It's just like changing accounts."

"Then why didn't you just sink it already?"

"I have crew on board."

"What? You suddenly grew a heart? It's a medical miracle," Welch said. "Come on, James. I know you better than that. Hostages mean nothing to you."

"Yes, you do know me. But there are people on board who have information I desire about the resistance. That and the fact that the *Joule* took three years and three hundred million dollars to build. She's a treasure herself. All things considered, I would rather not destroy it."

"You're going to have to," Welch said. "If you can. Because we're not turning back."

The captain again mouthed emphatically, "There is a self-destruct."

Again Welch ignored him. "Go ahead, Jimmy. Show me your self-destruct."

"You have no idea how tempted I am," Hatch said. "But enough of your insolence. I presume you have Ian on board. Tell him to look above the sonar panel, about six feet into the component. There he will find a GSX explosive device with an electronic detonator. It's not hard to find, as it is marked as such. There is enough slurry to blow an eight-foot hole in the wall of the boat and puncture both ballast tanks."

Welch turned to Ian, who was looking at him. "Can you see it?"

“Just a minute . . .” Ian walked over to the panel and began examining it. After a moment he looked back at Welch and nodded.

“Well?” Hatch said.

“He sees it,” Welch said.

“You should know I’m a man of my word.”

“Except when you’re not,” Welch muttered. “Why would we come back just so you could torture and kill us?”

“If you bring back my *Joule*, I give you my word none of you will die.”

“Or be tortured.”

“Or receive torture,” Hatch said.

Welch hesitated a moment, then said to the COB, “Turn the ship around.”

“Smartest thing you’ve done this year,” Hatch said.

“Cut off all communications.”

The radio went dead.

Everyone in the Conn was quiet. After a moment Jack said, “You know he’s lying.”

Welch looked at him stoically. “Of course I do.”

“I’m not okay with this. I’d rather die instantly in an explosion than return to Hatch to be tortured, then killed.”

“He’s right,” Zeus said. “I’m not going back.”

“I have no intention of going back,” Welch said, turning back to the captain. “Maintain course. I guessed there was a self-destruct on this boat. I just wanted Hatch to reveal where it was so Quentin could neutralize it.”

“That was brilliant,” Ostin said. “Freaking brilliant.”

“Can you do it, Quentin?” Welch asked.

“Help me, Ian,” Quentin said.

Ian touched a part of the console. “It’s directly through here. It’s wrapped around with wires and stuff. Looks like a bowl of spaghetti.”

“If it’s as surrounded by electronic junk as the captain says, I may take out something else with it,” Quentin said.

“You know the circuitry,” Welch said to the captain. “What components surround the detonator?”

“The sonar.”

“We can sail without sonar. Anything else?”

“Nothing we can’t sail without. But if it doesn’t work, you know he’ll detonate.”

“You prefer to take your chances with Hatch?” Welch asked.

“At least it’s a chance. It’s better than certain death.”

Welch laughed. “Don’t fool yourself. It’s still certain death. Your only choice is how you want to take it. Personally, I’m with Jack. I’d take a fast death to a prolonged, torturous death any day. And if you believe Hatch has a speck of mercy in his black, rotten heart, you’re a bigger fool than you know. When you were made an officer, you took an oath to resist capture or die trying. The second you took control of this ship for us, you broke that oath. Hatch will feed you to the rats just out of principle. He’ll make an example of you for the rest of his officers.”

The COB knew Welch was right.

“Destroy it,” he said to Quentin. “Before Hatch realizes we lied to him.”

“All right,” Quentin said to Ian. He pressed his hand against the metal wall. “Right here?”

“About a hand to the right.”

Quentin slid his hand. “Here?”

“Good.”

“How far in?”

Ian held up his hand to help him calculate the distance. “About four and a half feet to center.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sure enough.”

Quentin turned to Welch. “Go?”

“Do it.”

Quentin pressed his fingers harder against the stainless-steel panel, then surged. A light across the room flickered and then went out, along with a row of lights on the console.

“There goes our sonar,” the captain said. “And the cooling in the bow mechanical room.”

“How will we know if what Quentin did worked?” Cassy asked.

“If it didn’t, we’ll never know,” Welch said. “We’ll all be sleeping with Davy Jones.”

“Who’s Davy Jones?” Tessa asked.

“He was lead singer of a rock group called the Monkees in the midsixties,” Ostin said. “But Welch was more likely referring to Davy Jones’s *locker*, a nautical idiom meaning ‘the bottom of the ocean,’ which is where we’ll all be if Hatch detonates the *Joule*’s self-destruct.”

“I just hope it happens fast,” Tara said.

“The explosive device will immediately kill everyone within a seventy-five-foot radius of that console,” the captain said.

“Why does that sound so comforting?” Jack said, shaking his head.

“I know, right?” Tessa said. “Our life is so jacked up.”

PART SEVEN



13

A Little Help

About ten minutes after the last transmission, the Elgen technician tracking the *Joule* turned back to Hatch. “They’re not turning around, sir.”

Hatch stepped up to the console. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir. They’re maintaining their southbound course.”

“Are they still maintaining radio silence?”

“Yes, sir. Shall we initiate the self-destruct?”

“Only if we’re at a salvageable depth,” Hatch said. “How deep is the ocean where they are?”

“I’ll check, sir.” He slid his chair to a computer and punched in some numbers. “Depth, two hundred twenty-seven knots.”

“Well within our capacity. Is the GPS transmitter functioning?”

“Let me verify. Yes, sir.”

“Mark the ship’s location and sink the *Joule* on my word.”

“Yes, sir. You will need to type in the code for self-destruct.”

“Of course.” Hatch stepped up to the console and typed in a string of numbers. A red light started blinking on the monitor.

“Self-destruct switch is hot,” the technician said.

Hatch leaned forward. "Blow it."

"Yes, sir. Self-destruct mechanism activated." He pushed the button. Nothing happened.

"They've disabled the self-destruct."

"How could they do that? It's buried beneath six feet of metal."

"They could knock it out with a well-placed EMP. If the Glow Quentin is on board, he could do it."

"How would he know where it was?"

The crewman looked up at Hatch sheepishly. "You just told them, sir."

Hatch looked at the man spitefully. "What's the fuel level on the *Joule*?"

"They're running on reserve."

"How far will that get them?"

"Auxiliary reserve will get them about eight hundred nautical miles."

"He's got to refuel. What's his options?"

"Fiji and Samoa."

"Which is closer?"

"Fiji."

"He'll go to Fiji. I want you to send out a message and find who of our allies are closest to Fiji. I want to intercept the *Joule* before she refuels."

"Yes, sir."

"Now."

"Yes, sir." Just six minutes later the technician said, "The Philippine Navy is running exercises at one hundred seventy-six degrees longitude, eight hundred kilometers east of Vanuatu."

"How long would it take her to reach the north coast of Fiji?"

"At thirty-five knots, six and a half hours."

"We've got them. Amon, get me Secretary of National Defense Lorenzana."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir," EGG Bosen said, "the ship is carrying the Glows. They're too powerful for the Philippine Navy."

“Which is why we will send RESAT projectors and RESAT vests to the Philippine ships.”

“What if they submerge?”

“That’s what depth charges are for, EGG.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Admiral-General, Secretary Lorenzana is on the phone.”

Hatch grabbed the mouthpiece. “Secretary Lorenzana. Thank you for taking my call. We have a small problem, one that is rather embarrassing. One of our submersibles carrying an extremely volatile cargo has been stolen. . . . No, not nuclear. But advanced technology. We’ve been tracking their movements toward Fiji. . . . Yes, I’m aware that you have ships in the area; that is why I thought to contact you first. We need your help to avoid an international incident. . . . Thank you, Secretary. I knew I could count on you. Let me fill you in on the details. . . .”

PART EIGHT



Salvageable Depth

About an hour after the Elgen's last transmission, the COB said, "I guess Hatch isn't going to blow us up."

"Either we're not at a salvageable depth," Welch replied, "or Quentin succeeded."

"We *are* at a salvageable depth," the COB said.

"So Quentin succeeded."

"He can still track us," the COB said.

"Yes, but what can he do about it?"

"He'll think of something," Quentin said. "Hatch always has a card up his sleeve."

Welch slowly nodded. "You've got to give it to him. He's a genius of chaos."

"What do you think he'll do now?" Quentin asked.

"If I were Hatch, I'd try to intercept us before we refueled," Welch said.

"How would he do that?" Quentin asked.

"The only boat of his we didn't sink is the *Edison*, and we're too far along for him to catch us," the COB said.

“No. But he has friends,” Welch said. “Let’s just hope that they’re not in the area.”

PART NINE



15

The Edison

It had been more than thirty hours since Hatch had slept, and after he hung up with Secretary Lorenzana, he went to his quarters, leaving strict instruction to be disturbed only in the case of a dire emergency. That call came almost twelve hours later from EGG Amon.

“Admiral-General, we have a crisis developing.”

“What kind of crisis?”

“The natives are restless,” Amon said. “They are preparing to attack.”

“Our island?”

“Not yet. It’s best I show you. I’m in the war room.”

“I’ll be right there,” Hatch said. He climbed out of bed, poured a glass of Scotch, and then walked down the corridor to where EGG Amon was waiting outside the door. “What is going on?”

“We have footage, sir,” Amon said. He walked with Hatch to the side of the room covered with monitors. A third of the monitors were static.

“Why don’t we have images on Ares or Demeter?”

“The cameras have been destroyed, sir. But we picked up this footage before they were taken out.” Amon turned to the technician. “Roll Ares videos six and seven.”

“Yes, sir.”

One of the screens showed the Vaitupu dock with the ES *Regulator* approaching. Suddenly men appeared over the side of the ship, pointing guns at the Elgen. “Who is that?” Hatch asked.

“Tuvaluans. Keep watching.” The dockworkers tied up the ship. Then one of the dockside doors opened and a host of Elgen guard ran out.

“Our men?”

“No. They’re Tuvaluans wearing our uniforms.”

Just then Enele walked out of the boat.

“Who is that?” Hatch asked.

“That’s Enele Saluni. He’s the grandson of Prime Monkey Saluni.” Just then one of the soldiers pointed a gun at the camera and blew it out. The video went static. The other video was from inside the dock building. Men began walking inside. They pulled a map from the wall. Saluni pointed toward the camera, and one of the men walked over and shot it out as well.

“That’s enough,” Amon said. He turned to Hatch. “Saluni appears to be leading them. We’ve lost all contact with Vaitupu. I mean Ares.”

“Where did Saluni come from?”

“He was imprisoned on Hades.”

“So he survived.”

“He survived and appears to be leading a revolt.”

“Where are our soldiers on Vaitupu?”

“There’s no open communication. It would appear that the Tuvaluans have overthrown the island.”

“Where did they get the boats?”

“We’ve identified the boats as the *Regulator*, the *Pulse*, the *Proton*, and the *Neutron*. They’re agricultural ships from Demeter.”

“Have you contacted Demeter?”

“Demeter are these screens right here,” Amon said, pointing at more static screens. “Same story. Cameras out, no one’s home.”

“How many soldiers does Saluni have?”

“We have no way of knowing how many he took from Hades, but there were a little more than five hundred workers on Demeter. There were limited arms on Demeter, so I’m guessing that he took the people, then commandeered the boats and sailed to Ares for more weapons. If he’s gotten into the Ares armory, they’ll be completely armed.”

“Where is he now?”

“We don’t know. We expect that he is preparing to sail here.”

Hatch turned white. “Where are our soldiers?”

“They’re coming sir. We expect two hundred by midnight.”

“Initiate a curfew. Any Funafuti resident seen outside their homes after dark will be shot on sight. Set up patrols on all landing sites. If they try to dock, we’ll blow it up.”

“We don’t need to, Admiral-General,” Amon said. “We still have the *Edison*. She’s undermanned but still fully operational.”

Hatch’s demeanor changed from anger to delight. He laughed. “Of course, the *Edison*. EGG, this is excellent, excellent news. Here I’ve been worried about the natives rising up against us, and Saluni has done us the greatest possible service: he’s gathered all our enemies together and put them all on indefensible, lumbering, unarmed cattle boats. He might as well have sailed his rebels here in coffins. They’ll be easy targets for our battle cruiser. We’ll blow them out of the water long before they reach our island. We just have to make sure they never reach our island. How are our surveillance drones?”

“Operational.”

“Perfect. Send them out. Order the *Edison* to prepare to sail. Find the Tuvaluan rebels, then alert me.” Hatch turned to go.

“Yes, Admiral-General. Where are you going, sir?”

“I’m going back to bed, EGG. Finally I can sleep easy. Vey’s dead. We’ll bury Saluni and his revolution in the sea, and soon I’ll have the *Joule*, Welch, and the Glows back in hand. Everything is going our way. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, sir. Sleep well.”

Hatch smiled. “You can be certain I will, EGG. You can be certain I will.”

PART TEN



16

The Elder

Enele's boats pulled out of the Vaitupu harbor precisely as he had planned at four a.m. He had no information about the Elgen, and he wasn't taking any chances that they might have more of a force than he realized. He got less than three hours of sleep before going up to the *Regulator's* bridge to coordinate his army's departure. The boats sailed close together except the *Neutron*, which held so much explosive capability that an accident near the rest of the fleet could possibly sink all the ships.

The distance between Nui and Vaitupu was a little more than one hundred and seventy kilometers. Because they were sailing as a convoy, they matched their speed to the slowest of the ships, the ES *Proton*, an older produce cargo vessel that sailed between seventeen and eighteen knots, so it took the armada nearly six hours to reach their destination, the southernmost isle of Fenua Tapu.

All the boats except the *Regulator* anchored a mile out from the island, far from the reef's rocky, coral wall. The *Regulator* moved into the small Nui harbor usually reserved for the *Volta*, the Elgen's

science ship, which, at Hatch's orders, had sailed to Funafuti only a day earlier.

Nui was only slightly larger than Hades but very different in appearance and geography. Like Vaitupu, it was not an island but an atoll, so it was far more water than land and was sparsely populated, with more than twenty isles. The atoll was first discovered in 1568 by Spanish navigator Alvaro de Mendana. He named the island *Isla de Jesús*, Spanish for "Island of Jesus." The island was not visited by Europeans again until nearly three hundred years later, when a Dutch expedition came upon the island. They named it Dutch Island, but, curiously, it was also called Egg.

On Hatch's overthrow of the nation, in keeping with his renaming of the islands after Greek gods, he had renamed the island Athena, for the goddess of wisdom, craft, and war. It was dedicated to scientific research and was where the *Volta*, and her seventy-six scientists, was primarily based.

Prior to the Elgen's arrival, the Nui atoll had had a population of 521 natives. That number had since dropped significantly as, under the stress of foreign occupation, many of the older natives had died, and most of the men and half the women had been sent to other islands to work. By the time Enele arrived, there were only 172 natives—153 of whom were female.

Hatch had dedicated the island to research, and science and experiments were conducted on GPs with the MEI and new weaponry. Occasionally the Elgen guard would bring in one of the island residents if they were out of GPs, but that was rare, as the GPs were usually brought in from Hades, and the scientists were uncomfortable experimenting on natives they might know by name or might have seen in the marketplace. As one of the scientists crudely said, "You should never name a hog if you plan on slaughtering it."

* * *

"Where is the elder?" Adam asked, looking out over the waves breaking on the island's reef.

“He is on Piliaieve. It is one of the smallest of the islets. He won’t be hard to find.”

The *Regulator* docked around noon. Because Enele had no idea if there were any armed Elgen guards on the island, he sent out two of their women with baskets of fish, to walk around and observe. They encountered no Elgen, and when they felt bold enough to speak to one of the residents—a fisherman on the beach who was mending his nets—they were told that the only Elgen guard on Nui were assigned to the Elgen’s large boat (the *Volta*) and only occasionally came to town looking for kava or women or both. But just a week before, for reasons he didn’t know, the Elgen guards suddenly left the island, leaving only a few to guard the *Volta*. With the departure of the *Volta*, all traces of Elgen were gone. When the women asked the fisherman about Elder Malakai, the man turned away and refused to speak anymore.

After receiving the women’s report, Enele, Adam, Nazil, Zeel, and a force of six armed men—two of them in Elgen uniform—left the *Regulator* a little after three in the afternoon. As the isles of Nui were not all connected, they took one of the ship’s tenders and sailed north along the eastern side of the reef until they came to the fourth isle, Piliaieve.

They pulled their boat onto shore and stepped off onto a white sandy beach. There was no one around. While still a way from the island, Enele, using binoculars, had spotted a young boy near the isle’s shoreline, but he had gotten up and run off when he’d spotted their approaching craft.

“Where is everyone?” Adam asked.

Enele looked at him. “Perhaps bringing men dressed as Elgen guards was not such a good idea.”

They made their way off the beach to a line of palm trees and a dirt road.

“The good news,” Adam said, “is that it’s a small island. It won’t take long to search all the houses and find him.”

Enele stood silently with his arms crossed, a cross wind blowing back his hair. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

In the distance an elderly man rode a bicycle toward them. The bicycle's line was erratic, and several times the men thought the man, who looked too old to be riding a bicycle, might fall over. Enele's men gathered around him to watch the cyclist.

"Who is that?" asked one.

"I'll wager two coins that he'll fall," said another.

"He won't fall," Enele said.

When the old man reached them, he stopped the bicycle and got off. He wiped his brow, smiled at the men with a row of yellowed teeth, and then turned to Enele.

"My dear, dear friend. How you have grown. I am very glad you made it. I have been expecting you."



The Lightning God

Enele dropped to one knee, then Adam and the rest of his men followed. “Elder Malakai,” Enele said. “It is my honor to see you again.”

“Stand. Stand,” the elder said. “It is my great, great joy that you have come. I have prepared a meal for you. Come to my humble home and eat.”

Enele picked up the bicycle and offered it to the elder, but he deferred. “I will walk with you, my friend. I don’t often take my bicycle. I’m too old for it. But I was told you had finally landed, and I didn’t want you to have to wait.”

Enele smiled. “You are very kind.”

“How did you know we would be here?” Adam asked.

The old man looked at him but didn’t answer.

“So the Elgen are all gone,” Enele said.

“For the time being,” Malakai replied. He pointed to a grass hut fifty yards ahead of them. In the yard was a fire burning inside a ring of coral rocks. “That is my humble home.”

Enele grimaced. “You once lived in a magnificent house,” he said. “Not so many years ago.”

“An Elgen officer decided that he wanted it,” Malakai said.

“I am sorry,” Enele replied. “It is an injustice to be corrected.”

Malakai just smiled. “It is only a house, a fleeting thing. I have a roof; it matters little.”

The house was of typical Tuvaluan design—small with woven walls and a thatched roof. The men sat in the yard while a young woman brought out *pi* (drinking coconuts), *lolo* (taro leaf in coconut cream), and then fish wrapped in banana leaves.

After they finished eating, they went inside the small house. There was a long mat on the floor made of woven palm leaves.

“We will sit,” Malakai said. He spoke to the young woman. “My dear, bring us kaleve.”

“You are very kind,” Enele said.

“It is still our way to be hospitable when a guest arrives.”

“But you must have prepared for days.”

“I knew you and your men would be hungry when you arrived.”

“Then perhaps you already know why I have come.”

The elder nodded slowly. “I knew before the great flash.”

“The great flash,” Enele repeated.

“Tell me your story,” Malakai said.

Enele wiped his mouth. “We escaped from Hades—I mean Niutao—with fifty of our people, then sailed to Nanumaga. We met little resistance from the Elgen. There we brought on five hundred more and confiscated four large Elgen ships.”

“A wise plan.”

“Thank you. Next we sailed to Vaitupu and again took the island. We have filled our boats with weaponry and are ready to fight. I came to seek your counsel.”

“Time is of the essence,” Zeel suddenly interjected. “It is time we liberated Funafuti. The Elgen are gathering from around the world as we—”

Elder Malakai raised his hand and stopped him. “They have already gathered, my eager friend.”

“The Elgen have been crippled,” Nazil said. “It’s time that we gather and fight.”

The old man looked down for a moment. When he looked up, he said, “*Kāfai e t ō te vaiua k ā ' siu t ātou.*” He spoke in an ancient dialect unknown to any of the men except Enele.

“What did he say?” Zeel asked.

“He said, ‘When it rains, we shall get wet.’”

“What does that mean?” Nazil said rudely. He looked at Malakai. “Elder, this is no time for cowardice. This is the time to fight, while our enemy is weak.”

“Wisdom is not always cowardice. Boldness is not always courage. The evil man is not as weak as you think, my son. If you fight now, you will die, and then the evil man will have the land always. It is patience and wisdom that opens the blossom, not force. The time will come.”

“What time?” Zeel asked.

“There will be a moment of opportunity,” Malakai said. “You will know when it comes. It is when *he* comes.”

“When who comes?”

“The one the ancients spoke of. *Uira te Atua.*”

Enele looked at him quizzically. “*Uira te Atua?*”

“What does that mean?” Adam asked.

Enele turned to them. “The elder speaks of the lightning god.”

Zeel looked angry. “This is no time for silly tradition.” He raised his fist. “It’s time for revolution!”

“Yes. It is,” the old man said calmly. Then he was quiet for a very long time. “But not in the foolish manner you have planned.”

“Foolish!” Zeel shouted. “This is ridiculous. We’re wasting valuable time. We need to go to war! Now!”

“So eager to die, are you?” The old man looked at him with dark, steady eyes. “You want war? Fear not, you will have your fill of it. But don’t worry. You need not rush to it. It will come to you. All you can decide is where you shall meet it. But I warn you. If you meet it in the open sea, the water shall be your grave.” He looked at the other men. “Did I not warn the people that the Elgen would come?”

“Yes, Elder,” Enele answered. “You did.”

“Did I not warn the people to not take the gift of electricity?”

“Yes, Elder.”

“So now I tell you that someone will come to liberate us. Will you not believe me?”

“Forgive our lack of faith, Elder,” Enele said.

“If you truly wish to be liberated in a means other than death, listen to me. The Elgen have already built their army from without. They have brought in soldiers from other nations to fight their war with us. They have brought in navy ships and cannons. If you meet them on the sea, then your demise is assured.” He turned to Zeel. “Funafuti is not as weak as you believe. If you go to Funafuti, you will all die. Then who will liberate our home?”

“Where shall we go?” Enele asked. “Shall we wait here?”

“No. Nui cannot be defended. You will go to Nukufetau, the island the evil ones call Plutus. There you will find a fortress that will, for a time, stand against the Elgen host.”

“The great vault they are building,” Enele said. “For just a time?”

“Yes. It will fall. All fortresses fall in time. But there will be enough time for *Uira te Atua*. He will come. He will deliver you. Then you will know that it is time to expel the evil one and liberate Funafuti.”

“The lightning god,” Enele said again. “Are you sure?”

“Most assuredly,” Malakai said. “I have seen him. I have spoken to him. When he is ready, he will come.”



18

The Drone

“We need to leave immediately,” Enele said. “We need to reach Nukufetau before the Elgen find us.”

The old man stood. He suddenly looked more stooped, as if sharing the prophecy had stolen energy from him. “Have faith. He will come. *Uira te Atua* will come.”

“Be safe,” Enele said.

The old man said, “Safety is but an illusion. You will not see me again in this world. Now go with God.”

Enele looked at the elder sadly. “Then this is good-bye.”

The old man nodded. “Until we meet again in better realms.”

Enele again dropped to one knee, but the elder just said, “Rise and sail,” then embraced Enele.

Enele and his men got back into their tender and sailed quickly back to the *Regulator*. Enele radioed Noa and told him to contact the other ships and instruct them to leave immediately for Nukufetau. “Tell them I will explain when I return,” he said.

“Roger that,” Noa said.

* * *

Several hours after they had departed, Enele went out onto the deck. He was tired and anxious and wanted to feel the cool air on his face. A little more than a half hour later Zeel walked out to join him.

"I'm sorry to bother you. Do you wish to be alone?"

"No," Enele said. "We can talk."

Zeel put his arms over the rail next to Enele. After a moment he said, "I wish to apologize for my behavior of the last day. I have been . . . difficult."

"I would expect that of a warrior," Enele said. "You are following your heart." He looked over at Zeel. "Why the change of heart?"

"Adam told me about the prophecy. I can understand now why you have put so much trust in this man." He rubbed his chin. "What do you think of this lightning god the elder speaks of?"

Enele shook his head. "I don't know."

"Does he speak metaphorically?"

"I don't think so."

"The lightning god was the Greek god Zeus," Zeel said.

"And Thor, in Norse mythology. Nearly every ancient culture prophesied of a lightning god."

"There was a boy with us in Hades named Zeus. Could it be him?"

"I don't think so," Enele said.

After a moment Zeel said, "This will be something to see."

They both fell silent. The boat's hull crashed against the sea in a steady rhythm. Not far from them a school of porpoise chased along with the ship. Zeel took in a deep breath, then said, "If the elder is right and the Elgen have already rebuilt, do you think we will survive their assault?"

"All things are possible with God."

"And if there is no God?"

Enele turned back. "Then we're just dust and beasts, and what does it matter?"

They were both silent again. Suddenly Zeel pointed to something in the sky. "What is that?"

They both strained their eyes toward the rapidly dimming horizon. There was a white, airplane-like craft with a V-shaped tail and wings longer than its body. It soared about a thousand feet above them.

"I've seen one of those before," Enele said. "It's a long-range observation drone." He turned pale. "They've seen our boats. They know where we are. This is not good. I must go." Enele hurried back up to the bridge, followed closely by Zeel. Captain Noa looked back at them as they entered.

"Did you see the drone?" Adam asked.

"Yes. How much farther to Nukufetau?" Enele asked the captain.

"We have about two more hours."

"The Elgen could be there in an hour," Enele said. "How much faster can we go?"

"Maybe six knots," the captain replied.

"Do it," Enele said.

"And leave the *Proton* behind?"

"Yes. They can lag behind. If we're attacked, perhaps they can slip off and escape."

"What about the other ships?"

"Tell them what we're doing."

"I'll radio them."

Zeel looked afraid. "What did the elder say about being caught at sea?"

"Don't remind me," Enele said. "It wasn't good."



Abandon Ship

The *Proton* quickly fell behind as the remaining three ships, the *Regulator*, the *Neutron*, and the *Pulse*, moved ahead at speeds above twenty-three knots. Ninety minutes later, as the sun sank into the sea to the west, the jagged silhouette of the Nukufetau atoll came into view. “There she is,” Enele said. “That’s a beautiful sight.”

“I’m happier at what I’m not seeing,” Adam said. “Elgen boats.”

“Where’s the Elgen compound?” Enele asked Noa.

“Hatch’s Fort Knox is off Motulalo,” Noa said. “It’s the largest islet and the only deepwater port.”

“Where is that?”

“Southeastern tip of the island.”

“Then why are we sailing west?”

“Have you ever sailed to Nukufetau?”

Enele shook his head. “No. I was only there as a kid.”

“She’s a true coral atoll. The island’s pretty much a big rectangular frame filled with water. There’s a deepwater port into the lagoon on the northwest side of the island. If we can enter the lagoon, we can

sail south inside the reef and dock closer to the construction and the seawall our people just built. If there are Elgen ships, we'll be better concealed and better defended. If it's a big ship, the lagoon is shallow enough that she won't be able to follow after us."

"Well done," Enele said. "How far are we from the entrance?"

"We're about ten kilometers."

"Let's get there fast."

Just three kilometers from the deepwater opening in the atoll, there was suddenly a distant flash, followed by a loud explosion, echoing like thunder. A shell hit the water two thousand meters from the *Regulator*, exploding water several hundred yards into the air.

"There they are," Enele said.

"That missile was fired from a battle cruiser," Noa said. "It's the *Edison*. She's still intact."

"How far away is she?"

"She's covering the entry," Noa said. "They must have guessed our play. They know if we get in there, they can't follow."

"Can we get in there first?"

"No. They'll reach it before we do." Noa turned on his radio. There came the clamor from a foreign tongue, followed by English with a heavy Russian accent.

"Rebel ship. This is the ES *Edison* battle cruiser. Reduce your speed and surrender, or we will sink your ship."

"What are our options?" Enele asked.

"We can't outrun her," Noa said. "Only the *Neutron* can."

"We can't outgun her either," Adam said.

"It's like we brought a knife to a gunfight," Zeel said.

"A butter knife," Enele said.

"A plastic butter knife," Zeel added.

"We could try to ram her," Enele said.

Noa shook his head. "She'd sink us long before we reached her."

"We need to beach and get everyone off. Could we make it?"

"The reef will rip the bottom out of us," Noa said. "She'll definitely sink."

"At this point that's a given. We need to get the weapons off the ship. How far up the shore can you get?"

“At twenty-four knots, I think I should be able to get at least a quarter of the boat on land.”

“I’ll take a quarter,” Enele said.

“Our soldiers need to be prepared for impact. It’s like crashing a car.”

“I’ll alert them.”

“And they’ll need to abandon the ship fast. The *Edison* will continue to shell us. Even on land they can blow us up.”

“We’ve still got a better chance of surviving a ground shelling than being sunk at sea. Give me the radio,” Enele said.

Noa handed the mic to Adam, who handed it to Enele.

“Attention, all ships. The Elgen Navy is about to engage our ships. We can’t fight them. We are going to force our boats up the beach. Beach your craft on the nearest shore and abandon ship. I repeat, beach your craft and abandon ship.” He then switched the mic to the ship’s PA system. “Soldiers, this is Enele. We have come under fire from the Elgen battleship. If we stay on the water, they’ll sink us. We are going to beach our ship. Grab your weapons and brace yourselves for frontal impact. As soon as we hit, abandon the ship as quickly as possible. I repeat, brace for frontal impact and abandon the ship as quickly as possible.”

Enele turned back. “Zeel, I want you belowdecks. If I don’t make it, you’re in charge.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Noa, radio the *Proton*. Tell her to stay away.”

“Yes, sir.”

Suddenly, to the east of them, the *Neutron* banked hard to the port side, then picked up speed. She was the smallest and fastest of the four ships, capable of sailing upward of forty knots.

“Where’s Pio going?” Enele asked.

“Apparently not with us,” Noa said.

Adam lifted binoculars. “His crew is jumping off the boat.”

“What is he up to?” Enele said.

“He’s smart,” Noa said. “He’s the only one who can outrun them. That’s what he’s doing. By the time they finish with us, he’ll be long gone.”

“Where do you think he’s going?”

“Vaitupu,” Noa said, suddenly swinging the rudder. The entire ship rolled to its side. “Prepare for impact.”

Even in the growing twilight the brilliance of the white sand beach reflected the moon and loomed before them, growing larger with each second.

“Sixty seconds,” Noa shouted.

Enele lifted the PA system. “Sixty seconds to impact.”

“Forty-five.”

“Forty-five,” Enele repeated.

“Thirty.” Noa laid his hand heavily on the ship’s air horn.

“Thirty.” Enele glanced over at Adam, who was gripping his chair, his feet up against the front wall.

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen seconds!” Enele shouted. “Brace yourselves!”

“Impact!” Noa shouted.

Before Enele could speak, there was a loud, tearing, grinding sound of metal and rock. To Enele it felt as if everything had turned to slow motion. Noa was thrown into the boat’s controls, and Enele flew more than ten feet, crashing against the front of the bridge. Still, the ship remained remarkably stable as she cut into the beach far enough to rip out trees and foliage. When the motion had stopped, Enele jumped up and grabbed the mic.

“Abandon ship! Abandon ship! Grab your weapons and abandon ship.”

Men began jumping off all sides of the boat into the water and sand, like rats fleeing a burning ship.

“Here she comes,” Adam said, pointing to the north. The battleship was bearing down on the *Regulator*, now only a couple of kilometers away and moving in quickly.

“Get off the ship!” Noa shouted. “She’s going to blow us up.”

“Open the level doors,” Enele said.

Noa pushed a switch, then turned back. “The hydraulics are gone. We don’t have time to get the weapons. We’ve got to get everyone off. Especially you.” He turned to Adam. “Get him out of here.”

Adam grabbed Enele’s arm. “Come. Now.”

Adam's words were answered by an explosion as a shell struck the boat's stern, knocking them all to the ground.

"Go, go, go!" Noa shouted from his knees.

Adam and Enele got up and ran outside the bridge. The boat had burrowed so deeply into the sand that it was now only fifteen feet above the ground. "It's sand," Adam shouted. "Jump!"

They both jumped over the side of the boat. Just then a second shell hit near the middle of the ship, blowing it in two. Fire sprung up from the center of the boat.

"Noa's got to get off," Enele said. Almost as if in response to his words, there was a small explosion near the forward section of the boat, followed by a larger one as the flames reached the ship's fuel tank. The large explosion destroyed the whole of the bridge.

Both men gaped in shock. "He's dead," Adam said.

"We'll be dead too if we don't get out of here fast," Enele said, standing.

Just then the sound of high-caliber machine-gun fire began, leaving a path of sand flying up and down the beach.

"Get to the other side of the knoll!" Enele shouted to his men. Several had already fallen, hit by the gunfire. Enele and Adam found temporary shelter beneath a concrete seawall. Machine-gun bullets strafed the beach and struck the wall Enele and Adam had taken refuge behind, chipping the rock but not penetrating it. The battleship continued to draw closer to the *Regulator*.

"She's going to blow up our weapons," Adam said.

"She's going to blow us up first," Enele said. "Look at her guns." The ship's turret revolved toward them.

More gunfire flipped sand up off the beach and shredded the foliage around them. Enele's civilian soldiers ran in panic from the gunfire, something none of them had ever experienced. Then mortar shells started blowing up around them as well.

A kilometer to the north of them the *Pulse* beached. The older boat didn't fare as well as the *Regulator*, and the reef tore the boat fully in half. The back half of the ship rolled starboard, then burst into flames.

The battleship fixed its massive cannons on the beach, blowing large craters in the sand. Then the firing suddenly stopped.

“She’s anchoring,” Adam said. “They’re putting boots on the ground.”

“They’ll run right over us,” Enele said. “We need to gather everyone we can and get to the compound.”

“It’s nearly twenty kilometers from here.”

“Or we’ll die here,” Enele said.

Just then Adam’s eyes grew wide. He pointed toward the battleship. “Look!”

Bearing down at full speed on the battleship’s stern was the *Neutron*.

“She’s going to ram her,” Adam said. “She’s too small to do much damage.”

“No, she’s full of C4,” Enele replied.

“Oh yeah,” Adam said.

The *Edison* discovered the *Neutron* too late and tried to swing its guns to its stern. The *Neutron* plowed into the back of the battleship. It was only a few seconds before the tons of explosives in the *Neutron*’s hull detonated. The explosion decimated the *Neutron* and lifted the battleship into the air, sending fire through the entire boat and igniting the explosives and fuel it carried. The resulting explosion destroyed everything in the vicinity. When the smoke from the blasts cleared, there was nothing left of the *Neutron*, and the battleship was burning against the night sky like a funeral pyre.

“Pio,” Adam said.

“That was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen,” Enele said, standing. “Let’s gather everyone. You take everyone here and start unloading weapons. I’ll take some men down to the *Pulse*.” He turned to walk away, then stopped and turned back. “Someday we’ll build a monument to Pio right here.” Then he turned and sprinted off toward the *Pulse*.



20

The Gold Depository

In spite of the violence of their landing, only a few dozen of the *Pulse*'s soldiers were injured, and the forward hull of the *Pulse* was completely intact. Enele got on the boat's radio and called in their location to the *Proton*. As the *Proton* was the slowest of the fleet, they had loaded it with the fewest soldiers, which meant there was room to carry almost half of the stranded soldiers. Enele instructed the *Proton*'s captain to load up with weapons and soldiers as Enele and a contingency of men went to check out the Elgen's Plutus facility.

Four of the *Regulator*'s life rafts were still intact. Enele and twenty of his best soldiers, including Adam and Raphe, dressed in Elgen uniforms, loaded as many arms as they could, and then sailed back to the opening in the atoll's lagoon. It took them only a half hour to reach the massive Plutus depository that Hatch was building.

"What is that?" one of the soldiers asked.

"That's the Elgen's own Fort Knox."

"What's Fort Knox?"

“It’s the Americans’ gold depository. The Elgen plan to fill this building up with gold.”

The man shook his head. “I’m in the wrong business.”

In the darkness, they ran the raft up onto the beach, then quickly moved up toward the still incomplete fortification.

The gold depository that Hatch was building was smaller than Fort Knox, only because there wasn’t the land to build one larger. The building was designed to be a fortification as much as a vault. The walls were four feet of reinforced concrete, enough to withstand a direct missile strike. When it was complete, it would be six stories high and windowless, looking from a distance like a large concrete cube rising out of the ocean. There were also three levels built belowground, but they had been rendered useless, then concreted over, when seawater kept seeping in through the foundation. Around the base of the cube was a level of security and living quarters.

The structure was a little more than half-built. The bottom floor and first two levels were structurally complete and, in part, functional. Hatch had already started moving gold into the first-level vault, one of twelve independent vaults to be built.

There were three layers of chain-link fences around the building, with a guardhouse at each opening. Enele didn’t expect to find the compound unguarded like on the other two islands he’d approached. If there was gold inside, Hatch would leave his troops there. Enele gathered with his men. “We’ll never shoot our way into here. If they close up this place, there’s no touching them. So act like Elgen.”

As they approached the first checkpoint, Enele was surprised to hear the guard shout out to him in a thick Australian accent. “You’re late, mate.”

The greeting took Enele a little off guard. He spoke with his best Aussie accent. “We had a detour, mate. Didn’t you see the explosion?”

“Sure did,” the guard said. “They said over the radio some Toovoo rebels had stolen ships.”

“They did. Three of them agriculture ships from Demeter. We took care of them. Now they’re fried Toovoos.”

The man laughed. “How many you got with you?”

“Twelve.”

"Twelve? You're short six."

"Everyone's short these days. Since the battle."

The man shook his head. "Ain't that the truth. We've been pulling double shifts. Everyone has."

"We're going to be pulling doubles?" Enele asked, doing his best to look agitated.

"Oh yeah," the man said with a grin. "No one told you?"

"No, they left that out."

"Course they did."

"Maybe we should just go back."

"Nothing doing. I'm off two hours ago. Who's taking my place?"

After a brief hesitation Enele pointed at Raphe and said, "That man."

The guard looked him over. "You're new."

"We're all new," Enele said. "We're part of the New Zealand corps."

"Of course. That's why you're all brown. Well, get in here."

Raphe stepped into the room, and the guard came out. "There's an esky in the corner there; help yourself. It's full of beer. Sorry, just lite stuff." He shut the door, then turned back to Enele. "I'll show the rest of you where to check in."

"What about me?" Raphe asked.

"You stay put, mate. I'll check in for you."

"Anyone ever come here?"

"What do you mean? We're here every day."

"I mean try to get in?"

"Nah. Before everyone went to battle, I'd get some lookie-loo guards on R & R, wanting to see the gold. Like that's going to happen. I've only seen it once myself, and I've been here four months."

"None of the . . . brown skins?"

"Toovoos? There hasn't been one of them on the island since the tradies arrived and we started construction. It's the one place we don't use the slaves. The general don't want them to know a thing about this place. Word is, it's open season on Toovoos, mate. There's a twenty-five redback on Toovoo hide."

"That's a lot of money," Enele said, wanting to club the man. "Anyone ever collect?"

“One bloke tried. Turned out the guy he shot was a lost Samoan. Doesn’t count.”

“What about all the Toovoos we just fried?”

“Were they on island?”

“Almost.”

“Almost don’t count,” he said. The guard stopped at the next checkpoint. It was unmanned.

“Why is no one here?” Enele asked. “This should be guarded.”

“No drama, mate. We’re only guarding from ourselves. Foreigners don’t get anywhere near here before they’re sunk. Besides, like you said, we’re short. There’s only sixteen of us. And one of them’s in the brig.” He opened the second gate, and they walked through.

Enele processed the information. Sixteen guards, one in jail, one other with them. “Why is that?”

“Why is what?”

“Why is he in the brig?”

“He’s waiting transport.” He looked at Enele. “Oh, you want the skinny. He was caught where he shouldn’t be. Restricted area. Like I said, we’re only guarding from ourselves. I tell you, gold fever is a real thing. I’ve seen people here go crackers.”

They walked on past the third checkpoint. It was also unmanned, even though the lights were on and there was music playing. They walked another sixty feet to the main door. Enele looked at it in wonder. It was solid steel with heavy bolts surrounding it.

“That’s some security.”

“Bloody oath. That door can take a direct hit from a tank; it won’t even scratch it.”

Enele understood why the elder had directed them to this place. The guard held his key up to a pad, then pushed his fingerprint onto a screen.

“Where do we get our keys?”

“I’m taking you there, mate. Then I’m going to grab a Scotch and go to bed.”

“Drinking’s allowed?”

“Was it allowed where you came from?”

“No.”

“Did you still drink?”

Enele pretended to be embarrassed. “Sometimes.”

The man shook his head and laughed. “Sometimes.”

The door opened, revealing the hydraulics employed to operate it. “Like I said, ain’t no one coming in through that door.”

The inside was marble tile and virtually without decoration of any kind. Not even furniture. Their footsteps echoed down the long corridor.

“Place could use a rug,” Enele said. “Or two.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“Where is everyone?”

“It’s night. They’re in bed. Half of us should be on, but with everyone gone, we’re covering for each other. I expect the same from you. We don’t like troublemakers. Don’t make us look bad, or you might find yourself accidentally locked in a vault for life.”

“I wouldn’t dream of causing trouble,” Enele said. “So how many of us are on?”

“After I go to bed, just you and your man Louis.”

“Who’s Louis?”

“You’re about to meet him.” The guard led them to a small, darkened room filled with monitors. “Louis, here’s our replacements.”

The man turned around. He was bald with Maori tattoos across his face. “Replacements? The replacements were canceled,” Louis said. His accent was American. “Who are you?”

Enele pulled his gun, and the other Tuvaluans followed suit. “Like the man said, we’re your replacement. Get away from the console. Now.”

Louis stood. He was shorter than he appeared when sitting down, barely five feet tall. “What have you done, Oliver?”

“Your name is Oliver?” Enele said.

“Oh, buggers,” Oliver said. “I’m in the dunny now. This is gonna get me fed to the rats.”

“Only if the Elgen win,” Enele said.

They handcuffed the two men and made them lie facedown on the floor of the room. Enele put the gun to Oliver’s head. “Everyone else is in the bedroom?”

“Yeah, mate.”

“Where is that?”

“Just straight down the hall, mate.”

“Where’s the brig?”

“Opposite end. Door at the end, down the stairs.”

“Peter,” Enele said to one of his soldiers, “check out the brig. The rest of you come with me.”

The men walked out of the room, leaving just one soldier behind with Oliver and Louis. Enele and his men could have found the sleeping quarters from the snoring. It was seismic. As they positioned themselves outside the door, Peter returned. “I found the brig,” he said. “The keys to the cells are in the control room.”

“How many cells are there?”

“Three.”

“Good. That’s where we’ll put them. Go get the keys. I’m sure that Louis will know where they are.”

“Got it.”

“Ready?” Enele asked his men. He opened the door, then turned on the lights.

Someone immediately groaned. “Put out the light, you wanker.”

Enele fired one round into the ceiling. The bullet ricocheted, striking the metal frames of one of the beds and ringing like a bell. Everyone woke.

“To your feet! Now! We don’t have time to waste. Any erratic movement, and we shoot!”

The men, still groggy, stood.

“Take it easy, mate,” one of them said. “Just getting a little shut-eye.”

“We’re not your mates,” Enele said. “We’re Toovoos.”

The men were suddenly afraid.

“Get in line, hands on head. We’re taking you down the hall.”

As they lined up, Enele counted the men. “There’s only twelve. We’re missing someone.” He pointed his gun at the men in line. “Where’s the missing man?”

“He’s in the dunny,” one of the men said.

“The toilet,” one of the soldiers translated.

“Go get him,” Enele said to the soldier closest to him.

A minute later the soldier came back with a handcuffed man. The man looked terrified.

“Let’s move out,” Enele said.

Peter met Enele as he came out into the hall. “I’ve got the keys.”

“Let’s lock them up.”

They marched the men down to the brig, locking four or five in each cell. A few minutes later Oliver and Louis were brought down as well.

“Oliver was on guard,” one of the Elgen said. “You the one who let these blokes in?”

“He’s the man,” Louis said. “Waltzed them right in here and offered them dinner.”

“Shut up,” Oliver said.

“Shut yourself up,” Louis said. “You done us in.”

Oliver turned to Enele. “You can’t put me in with them, mate. They’ll bloody kill me. You’re right in what you said. The only chance I got is if you win. So let me help you win. I know this place inside and out. I know all the codes and tricks. There are things you won’t know without me.”

“Listen to the snivelin’ traitor,” one of the guards said. “Let us ’ave him, mate. We’ll take good care of him.”

Enele looked at Oliver for a moment, then said, “You give us any reason to doubt you, you die. If we’re overrun by the Elgen, you’re the first to go. You join us, you’re burning the boat . . . mate.”

“My boat’s already burned, mate,” Oliver said back. “I’m thrown in with you.”

Enele thought a minute more, then said, “All right. Lock Louis up with the rest. You, Vete, have the brig. If anyone tries anything, don’t wait; shoot. If they try to mess with the door or give you any trouble, shoot them, then shoot everyone else in the cell with them. Everyone. We’ll see if they can police themselves.”

Enele walked back upstairs with the rest of the men. He turned to his fifth-in-command, a short, muscular man named Satini. “Go tell Raphe to radio Nazil and tell him we’re in. Start transporting the weapons and supplies. I want this place locked down before the sun

comes up. Then relieve Raphe up front, lock the gates, and have him report to me immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

Enele turned to Oliver. “As soon as my men get here, I’m going to have you give us a look around.”

* * *

Oliver took Enele, Raphe, Adam, and three other soldiers around the building, first to the vaults, then up the stairs to the third floor. The third floor was complete, though without tile flooring or windows, and the plumbing and wiring were still visible.

“This is where they stopped work when the battle started,” Oliver said. “This room is secure.”

“What’s above us?”

“The fourth floor. It’s still open.”

“What do you mean, *open*?”

“It’s not finished. I’ll show you.” They walked up a flight of stairs to the next floor. Oliver unlocked then opened a door, and a rush of moist air enveloped them. The walls and beams of the building were mostly up but there was no roof; the sky visible above them. “Like I said, it’s still open.”

Enele went to one side and looked out a ten-inch opening. He could see all around the island for miles as the moon rippled off the dark waters below them. Then he went up to the north wall and looked out. He could see the *Proton* flanked by several rafts, making its way toward the compound. He turned back to Adam. “We’ll put our machine guns up here.” Then he added, “Too bad we didn’t have a place like this in Hades. We might still be fighting.” He turned back to Oliver. “Where is our electric power coming from?”

“There’s a mini Starxource plant in the basement. The power is self-contained.”

“Where do we stand on water and food?”

“This place was designed to withstand a siege. There’s no natural springs in the Hatch islands, so our water comes from rainwater. We have a five-thousand-gallon tank and rainwater catchment on the roof.

Also, a three-thousand-gallon storage tank on the second floor. How many men do you have?"

"A little more than five hundred."

"Even if they take out the water tank on top, we'll still have enough water for a month. Maybe more."

"What about food?"

"There's a café and a huge pantry on the main floor. It's practically a supermarket. There's additional food storage in the basement. Nothing you'll grow fat on, mostly dry foods and rations."

"We can hunker down," Enele said. He stifled a yawn.

"You need to get some sleep," Adam said.

"We all need sleep, but not until we're locked up," Enele replied. "Raphe, I want you to pick twenty-five soldiers and have them sleep for the next four hours."

"Four hours?"

"That's about how long it's going to take us to unload the boats."

"Yes, sir." Raphe hurried off. Enele turned to Oliver. "Where do you bring in shipments?"

"Around the east side."

"Are there any trucks or vehicles we can use to transport things inside?"

"Around the side are cargo doors. There are two flatbed trucks."

"Keys?"

"We usually just leave them in the ignition."

"Take us there." He turned to Adam. "The *Proton* just arrived. Let's help them unload."



21

A New Day

Oliver led Enele and his men back down to the main floor, then down a side corridor to the east of the compound, where the loading gates were located. As he'd said, there were two trucks.

"Let's drive them around front," Enele said to Adam. "Oliver, Temo, and I will take this truck. You guys take the other."

"You'll have to go around the side," Oliver said. "There are puncture spikes all through that section."

Enele leaned out the window. "Follow me."

They took a circuitous route that led them out near the second checkpoint. Ahead of them the *Proton* had just docked, and men were walking up to the front gate. Enele and Adam drove the trucks forward to the first checkpoint. "Satini," Enele said.

"Hey, boss."

"Open the gate."

"You got it, boss."

They drove past the walking men, all of whom were carrying weapons or food.

"They're exhausted," Temo said.

“But still alive,” Enele replied. “Let’s keep them that way.”

Enele and Adam backed the trucks up to the boat, and men climbed up on top of each flatbed while others started handing things up to them.

A soldier walked up to Enele’s window. “Is everything going to the same place?”

“For now, yes. We’ll take everything through the side doors. Is this everything?”

“No. We’ve got another boatload.”

“Then have them take everything off the boat before carrying them to the trucks.”

“Aye, sir.” He walked away. A moment later Jimi Laafai, the *Proton*’s captain, climbed down to talk to Enele. One of the soldiers pointed the way to Enele, and Jimi walked up to him. “Enele.” He leaned up against the truck.

Enele shook his hand. “What’s the situation on the *Pulse* and *Regulator*?”

“Bad and good. The *Pulse* lost half her munitions in the water. She had already broken in half when she hit shore. When the battleship exploded, the waves pulled the back section into the sea and we lost her. We salvaged everything we could out of her. That’s what the men are unloading now, along with our payload.”

“And the *Regulator*?”

“She’s a tough old ship. I think we can salvage just about everything, some water damage, but minimal. We have about a hundred and fifty men with her right now carrying everything out. After I finish unloading, I’ll sail back and pick up the rest of the supplies, then bring everyone back with me. We’ll have twice the men unloading, so we’ll make quick work of it.”

“You can carry everyone back?”

“Yes. I mean, we’ll look like a train in India with people riding on the roofs, but she’ll sail.”

“How many did we lose?”

“Twelve. Twenty-six injured. I brought them with me. The injured ones.”

“Who’s taking care of them?”

“We’ve got a doctor from Vaitupu.”

“How about the dead?”

“We’ve put them aside for now. You want me to bring them?”

Enele thought. “Yes. I don’t like the message it sends to our soldiers by leaving them.”

“You got it.”

“Do you have any blankets?”

“A few dozen.”

“Wrap them up and bring them back. We’ll leave them on the boat.” Enele looked back at the *Proton*. “Looks like they’re about done clearing her out.”

“All right,” Jimi said. “Back to work. See you in a couple.”

Jimi ran back to his boat while the men began filling the trucks.

“It’s going to take a couple of loads,” Temo said.

“Tell them to fill the trucks, then jump on. We need men to unload.”

Temo nodded and climbed out.

“Where’d you get all your men?” Oliver asked.

“Some from Vaitupu. Some from Demeter. Some from Hades.”

“No one leaves Hades,” he said.

Enele looked at him. “I did.”

“You came from Hades?”

“Sure did, mate.”

“Crikey,” he said. “No wonder you’re so tough.”

Adam’s truck started and pulled out ahead of them, the headlights illuminating the way. The truck was piled high with munitions, and men were balanced on top of the cargo and the truck’s cab itself. Temo jumped back into Enele’s truck. “We’re loaded.”

Enele started up the truck and followed Adam.

* * *

The trucks made two more trips before they had transported everything inside.

“You need to get some sleep,” Adam said to Enele as they walked back into the building. “The *Proton* will be another hour. We can handle this.”

“I’m not going to sleep while my men work,” Enele said sternly. “And we won’t sleep until we have fortified ourselves.”

Just then Nazil ran in the front door of the compound. “Enele! Enele!”

“What is it, Nazil?”

Nazil had a large smile on his face. “Look who has come!”

In through the door walked a soaked Captain Pio.

“Pio!” Enele shouted. He ran to him, and they embraced. Everyone turned and looked. They spontaneously broke out in applause. “How are you here?”

“Once I knew my path was set, I jumped off the back of the boat and swam for the bottom of the sea.”

“But the blast . . .”

“Yes, it tumbled me into the reef,” he said, lifting his arm to reveal the ragged, cut flesh. “But I’m here.”

“Yes, you are.” Enele turned toward the rest of his men. “Behold the hero!”

Everyone clapped again.

“This is a good omen,” Adam said.

“Yes,” Enele agreed. “It is indeed. Now let’s get the boats emptied and these doors locked.”

* * *

In spite of their exhaustion, the Tuvaluans finished transporting all the munitions and supplies into the depository, finishing just an hour before sunrise. Enele had them place the machine guns up on the fourth floor, then met with his war council: Nazil, Zeel, and Adam, who were going through their inventory of weapons and distributing them around the compound.

“We have everything salvageable inside,” Adam said.

“All right. Let’s lock the place down. Have Raphe rouse his soldiers and tell them they’re on guard now.”

Before going to sleep, Enele climbed back up to the fourth level and looked out over the ocean between Plutus and Nike. The rising sun cast a beautiful, rose-gold glow over the water as the sun rose from the sea. In other circumstances it was his favorite time of day—the promise of a new beginning. But now it seemed to hold only the promise of doom.

PART ELEVEN



Hunted

“We’re almost to Fiji,” Welch said to Jack. “Wake everyone. Tell them to prepare to disembark. We don’t have much time onshore, and they’ll want to get some real air.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Wait,” Welch said. “I’ll do it myself. I’m going to take a shower. You and Zeus have the Conn.”

“Yes, sir.”

About twenty minutes after Welch left, Jack pointed to the panel. “What’s that?”

“We’re approaching vessels,” the COB said. “And they’re approaching us.”

“Commercial or military?”

“I can’t tell.” He turned to a crewman. “Rig for silent running.”

“Secure for silent running.”

“Start evasive maneuvering. Back out to sea, two knots.”

A few minutes later the COB said, “They’re definitely following us. How are they following us? Rise to periscope level.”

“If we do that, won’t they see us?” Jack asked.

“They’ve already seen us,” the COB replied. “I want a better look at who’s hunting us.”

“Rising two meters,” a crewman said.

The *Joule* rose to periscope depth as the COB walked to the periscope. He looked out, then said, “They’re military.”

“Should we go to full submerge?” the crewman asked.

“No. They have depth charges. And somehow they’re tracking us.” The COB breathed out. “Turn the radio back on. They may be hailing us. Someone better get Captain Welch. Fast.”

“I’ll get him,” Jack said. He quickly left the Conn. A few minutes later both men returned. Welch’s hair was wet. “What is it?”

“We’re being hunted by military vessels.”

“How many?”

“Three. One’s a battleship.”

“Can we outmaneuver them?”

“No.”

“Then we’ll submerge.”

“They have depth charges.”

“They can’t hit what they can’t see.”

“That’s the problem. They’re tracking us, sir. It’s as if they have our GPS.”

Welch gritted his teeth. “Hatch.” He walked over to the periscope and looked out. “Who are they?”

“I don’t know.”

“Get everyone to the Conn,” Welch said to Jack. “Now.”

Jack hurried off to the bunks. Ostin was the first to emerge from the bunk room. He was followed by Jack and the others.

“What’s going on?” Ostin asked.

“We’re being hunted,” Welch said.

“By who?”

“We’re not sure yet,” the COB said. “But their flag has a Morse.”

“What’s a Morse?” Jack asked.

“It’s a lion with a fish body,” Ostin said. “It’s also the symbol of the Philippine Navy.”

“How do you know that?” Welch asked.

“He knows everything,” Jack said.

“He’s right,” the COB said, turning away from the periscope. “I recognize the number sequence on the boat. They are Filipino.”

Just then the *Joule’s* radio snapped with crisp static, followed by a voice with a heavy accent. “Mutineers of the *Joule* vessel, on behalf of the Philippine government we order you to surface immediately and surrender yourselves. If there is any resistance, we have been given orders to sink your vessel.”

“Will they really do it?” Tessa asked.

“Do you want to find out?” Zeus asked.

“They’ll do it,” Welch said.

“I say we surface,” Zeus said. “When they try to take us, we attack. They don’t know what we can do.”

“Since when does Hatch have control of the Philippine Navy?” Quentin asked.

“He has control of their country’s electricity. Ergo, he has their navy as well,” Welch said.

“This is sounding a lot like Peru,” Zeus said.

“Soon the whole world will be like Peru,” Welch said. “Everyone beholden to the Elgen for their energy.” He turned to the COB. “Tell him we’re surfacing.”

The COB lifted the microphone. “This is COB Quinn of the *ES Joule*. We are following your orders. We will surface where we are.”

There was a pause; then the voice returned. “You have five minutes.”

“Copy that.” He set down the mic. “We’ve got five minutes. What do you want to do?”

Welch looked around at the anxious faces of the teens. “We don’t know how deep their loyalties are, but we must assume they are working for Hatch. Prepare for the worst.”

“If we’re preparing for the worst,” Nichelle said, “I’d rather die by explosion than be eaten alive by rats.”

“Except we don’t know if they’ll turn us over to Hatch,” Jack said.

“There are maritime laws,” Ostin said. “They should take us to the Philippines.”

“Governments break international laws all the time when their national security is threatened,” Welch said.

“We can take them,” Zeus said.

“What do we do?” Jack asked Welch.

“I think Zeus is right. We take the chance,” Welch said. “Otherwise we’re dead right here.” He turned to the COB. “Surface.”

“Surfacing,” the COB said.

“They’re filling the deck with armed sailors,” Ian said.

“How many?”

“Maybe a hundred.”

Welch looked around at the group. “This is it. Don’t move until everyone is up top and I give the command—then let loose on them with everything.

“Quentin, I want their ships blacked out—communications, cameras, everything. Taylor and Tara, I want complete confusion. Tara, make everyone look the same, so they don’t know who to shoot at.”

“Who do you want everyone to look like?”

“Their commanding officer,” Welch said. “Whoever is calling the shots. That will really mess with their minds.” He turned back. “Zeus, Torstyn, hit those soldiers with guns first. Jack and Ostin, grab their guns and return fire. McKenna, I want your brightest flash; blind them if you can.” He turned to Cassy and Tessa. “Tessa, I want you with Cassy. I want you two to freeze everyone—just like you did when you rescued us at the school in Taiwan.”

“I can do that,” Cassy said.

Welch put his hands behind his back. “We’ll hit them so fast, they won’t know what’s happening to them.”

“Then what?” Ostin asked.

“We disable their ships. Then we’ll fuel the *Joule* and sail for Australia.” He looked around. “Any questions?”

No one responded.

“All right, then. Wait until my command. Good luck.”



War Criminals

Welch was the first to climb up the tower to the *Joule's* deck. He was greeted by more than seventy guns, every one of them pointing at him. He was followed by Ian, Jack, Quentin, and Torstyn. Then Tara and Taylor, Nichelle, Abigail, McKenna, Ostin, Zeus, Tessa, and Cassy.

Before Welch could shout out the command, all the electric youths fell to the deck, frozen with pain.

“RESATs,” Quentin groaned to Ian. “You didn’t see them?”

“No, man. They were disguised.”

Everyone had fallen to their knees or stomachs except the Nonels—Ostin, Jack, Welch, and the Elgen crew. Suddenly Ostin dropped to his knees, then his stomach, groaning out loudly in pain as he rolled closer to the side of the deck.

Jack looked at him with a perplexed expression.

“Fall down,” Ostin shouted as loud as he dared. “Near the edge.”

Jack also dropped to his knees, groaning loudly as he held his side, grimacing as if in pain.

Ostin continued to roll over until he was about a yard from the far edge of the boat. Jack rolled up next to him.

“When I say ‘now,’” Ostin said, “we’re going to roll off the side. Got it?”

Jack nodded. “Got it.”

Ostin looked at Taylor, who was on the opposite side of the boat. She suddenly looked over at him. Even though she was in pain, she could still hear his thoughts, carried to her by the wet steel deck. Ostin looked around, then thought, *Now, Taylor.*

Taylor erupted in a bloodcurdling scream. For a brief moment everyone turned toward her. “Now!” Ostin whispered fiercely. He and Jack rolled off the side of the boat, dropping twelve feet into the water. With Taylor’s distraction, no one noticed their disappearance. They swam underwater, reemerging on the other side of the *Joule*, clinging to the boat beneath a small metal fin.

“What now?” Jack asked.

“Just stay close to the boat. It will pull us in to Fiji.”

“How do you know it’s going to Fiji?”

“It’s out of fuel.”

“They could tow it back to Tuvalu,” Jack said.

“Let’s just hope they don’t.”

While Jack and Ostin held their place, the Filipino sailors swarmed the *Joule*’s deck, handcuffing Welch and the *Joule*’s crew while soldiers walked among the youths, strapping RESATs to them.

Since neither Hatch nor the navy knew how many people were on the boat, no one even suspected that Jack and Ostin were missing. A patrol of six sailors climbed down the Conn, looking for anyone left behind. They returned fifteen minutes later with Kiki.

“She’s the only one left. She says she’s the cook. She’s Fijian.”

“Take her too,” the commander said. “We’ll let the Elgen sort them out.”

The Glows, Welch, and the *Joule*’s crew were marched single file onto the largest of the ships, then taken belowdecks, where they were separated by gender and locked in four separate cells in the boat’s brig.

“I want to speak to your leader,” Welch said from behind bars.

The man he spoke to wore a bright white shirt with several gold bars and gold tasseled epaulets on his shoulders. "I am the leader. I am the ship's captain."

"I demand to be taken to the American embassy. You've illegally taken us prisoner."

"We've done nothing illegal. You are war criminals. We are returning you to stand trial."

"We've done nothing against your country. The Philippine courts will free us."

The captain shook his head. "Yes, but we are not taking you to the Philippines. We have been ordered to return you to the location of your crime. We are taking you back to answer to President Hatch of the Hatch Islands."

PART TWELVE



24

Ostin and Jack

By the time the navy boats started off, Ostin and Jack were already exhausted from the ocean waves slamming them up against the side of the *Joule*. Fortunately, Jack had found some narrow stainless-steel rungs that ran down the side of the ship to hold on to; otherwise they would have already been too tired to tread water.

As the navy boats' engines revved, Jack and Ostin lowered themselves back into the water so they wouldn't be seen by anyone on the departing ships. As the ships moved out of eyesight, the *Joule* began to vibrate in a low, steady hum as its engines began to churn.

"We need to climb up onto the side of the boat," Jack said.

"That's too risky," Ostin said. "Someone might see us."

"Have you ever tried to hold on to a waterskiing rope after you fell?"

"I've never water-skied before."

"Trust me, you can't hold on."

Ostin did the physics in his head. "You're right."

They climbed back up the narrow, metal rungs until Jack, who was below Ostin, was perched just a few feet above the waterline. Still, an

occasional wave tried to pry them off the side of the boat.

Then the boat began to move forward. As the *Joule* picked up speed, it began to plane, spraying a steady stream of salt water against both of them.

“How good a swimmer are you?” Jack shouted.

“Not good,” Ostin replied. “Why?”

“If they submerge, we’re going to have to swim to Fiji. It’s probably three or four miles.”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” Ostin said.

Jack thought a moment, then said, “Don’t worry about it. We’d probably get eaten by sharks anyway.”

“You’re all kinds of sunshine today,” Ostin replied.

About five minutes later Ostin pointed toward the eastern horizon. “That’s Fiji. We’re getting close.”

“What’s the plan?” Jack asked.

“Why are you asking me?”

“Because you always come up with the plan. I’m the brawn; you’re the brains.”

Ostin looked ahead at the approaching island, then said, “First priority is not getting caught. We’ll have to jump off before we reach port, then swim in.”

“We’ll look weird, walking out of the ocean all wet.”

“We’ll just look like dumb tourists who fell off a boat,” Ostin said.

“Then what?”

“We’ll need to somehow get a boat to get back to Tuvalu.”

“How do we know they’ll take them to Tuvalu?”

“Hatch would have insisted.”

“How do we know Hatch was behind it?”

“They had RESATs.”

“Oh,” Jack said. “You’re right. But we’ll need more than a boat. We’ll need weapons. Maybe an army. Does Fiji have an army?”

“Yes. It’s small. Thirty-five hundred soldiers. But Hatch probably owns them, too.”

“He owns everyone.”

“Not everyone,” Ostin said. “At least not yet.” Ostin thought for a moment, then said, “We don’t need an army. We already have one.”

Jack looked at him. "Yeah? And where are you hiding it, your pocket?"

"The Tuvaluan people. They're like a bomb that just needs to be detonated. It could be like the eighteenth-century French Revolution when the people stormed the Bastille fortress for weapons. The Tuvaluans could attack Hatch at the Starxource plant. Enele is probably already planning that. We need to somehow find Enele. He's the key."

"I like Enele," Jack said. "He's got that Polynesian warrior blood in him. But we're still going to need a boat first. And a place to stay."

"Food would be nice too," Ostin said. "I'm starving."

Just then a fish jumped out of the water, hitting the side of the boat and then smacking against Ostin. Ostin swatted it away, almost losing his grip.

Jack laughed. "Why'd you do that? You said you were hungry. That was sushi-grade fish."

"I'd rather have a hamburger."

Jack shook his head. "If I see one swimming down there, I'll let you know."

* * *

About three hundred yards from the dock, the *Joule* slowed to a wakeless speed. Ahead of them, there were dozens of commercial fishing boats in the harbor, as well as a few large tankers.

"That's the port of Lautoka," Ostin said. "Lautoka is the second-largest city in Fiji."

"We better jump off soon," Jack said. "Before someone on one of those boats spots us." He climbed down to the edge of the water. "You good to swim that far?"

"I'm good," Ostin said.

"Let's go," Jack shouted, jumping into the water.

Ostin held his nose and jumped in after him. When he came up, Jack was about thirty feet from him. The *Joule* was already a good distance away from them both.

“Come on,” Jack shouted, swimming toward the shore. Ostin started after him, surprising himself at how much better a swimmer he was than he used to be. Fighting the Elgen was like training for the Olympics.

When they were about a football field away from shore, Jack stopped and treaded water, waiting for Ostin to catch up.

“Let’s swim over there by those sailboats,” Jack said. “Less likely anyone will see us.”

“Lead the way,” Ostin said, panting.

Jack reached the shore first, lifting himself up onto the wood-planked dock. Ostin arrived just a few minutes later. Jack reached down and pulled him up; then they both fell back onto the dock, panting.

“Nothing ate us,” Ostin said.

“Did you see that hammerhead shark swim beneath you?”

Ostin’s eyes widened. “No.”

“Me neither,” Jack laughed. He closed his eyes and asked, “Pop quiz. Would you rather be eaten by a shark or Elgen rats?”

Ostin was quiet a moment, then replied, “A shark.”

“Me too,” Jack said.

“You know, the Fijians used to eat people. They called these the Cannibal Isles.”

“You already told us that.”

“I did?”

“On the plane on the way here.”

Ostin said, “That seems like a year ago.”

“At least,” Jack said.

They lay for a few more minutes as the sun dried them. The salt water stuck uncomfortably to their skin.

“I need to wash off,” Ostin said.

“Maybe they’ve got showers over on that beach.”

Jack stood, then helped Ostin up. They were walking across a small grass strip toward the beach when a large native man asked in a British accent, “Are you two okay?”

Ostin and Jack turned to see who was talking to them. The man was muscular and at least three inches taller than Jack. “We’re fine,

thanks," Ostin said.

The man grinned. "Usually we put on swimsuits before we take a swim."

Ostin pretended to laugh. "We weren't planning on swimming. We were out fishing and our raft sank."

The man looked at them quizzically. "Really? Your raft sank? How did that happen?"

"A shark bit it."

Jack said, "A great—"

"Bull shark," Ostin said, knowing that there had not been a reported sighting of a great white in Fiji for many years.

"There are many bull sharks near this reef," the man said. "They can be aggressive. You're lucky you're still alive."

"We are," Ostin said. "But we lost everything. Our raft, our fishing poles, our cell phones. Even the bag with our wallets."

"That's too bad," the man said, studying them. "Perhaps I can help you. That's my house right over there. The green one. You can clean up. I can find you some dry clothes." He looked at Jack. "Mine would fit you." Then he looked at Ostin. "I'll get you some clothes from my sister."

Jack hid his grin.

The man stuck out his hand to Jack. "I'm Vishal."

"Vishal?" Jack repeated.

"Yes. Almost every man in Fiji is named Vishal. It's far too common."

"I'm Thomas," Ostin said.

"Thomas? That's also a popular Fijian name."

He turned to Jack. "What is your name?"

"Moki?" Jack said, making it sound more like a question than an answer.

Vishal's brow furrowed. "Moki? That's a peculiar name. Are there many Americans named Moki?"

"No. My mother was, like . . . Swedish."

Ostin rolled his eyes.

"I didn't know 'Moki' was a Swedish name. Very peculiar. It's my pleasure to meet you, Thomas and Moki."

“Our pleasure,” Ostin said. “Thanks for your help.”

“Glad to help. Follow me.”

Ostin and Jack walked a few yards behind him.

“Why did you say your name was Moki?” Ostin whispered.

“Why did you lie about your name at all?” Jack replied.

“We don’t know if he works for the Elgen.”

“Would an Elgen guard offer to help?”

“He would if it were a trap.”

Vishal led them to his house. “Where are you two staying?” he asked Jack.

Jack turned to Ostin. “What’s the name of that place?”

“Suva,” Ostin said.

Vishal looked at him curiously. “You rafted all the way from Suva?”

“No, we rafted from Nadi.”

Vishal seemed more satisfied with this answer. “There are many boat rentals in Nadi. So many tourists. I have friends in that business. Which company was it?”

“Don’t remember,” Ostin said. “I just remember where they were located.”

“And where was that?”

Ostin paused, then said, “On the beach.”

A slight grin crossed Vishal’s face, and he stopped in front of a small stucco house. “We are here. Come in. Please.” He opened the door, and Jack and Ostin followed him in. The house was simple, with only a few pieces of furniture. There was a large cross on the wall.

“Excuse me a moment, please,” Vishal said. He left the room.

“You’re a good liar,” Jack said. “I’ve never been very good at it.”

“Thank you,” Ostin replied. “I think.”

Vishal returned with two towels and some shorts and a T-shirt for Jack. Jack held up the T-shirt. It read:

I'M FIJIAN
BUT YOU CAN CALL ME
AWESOME

“Thanks,” Jack said. “That *is* awesome.”

“You probably wish to wash the salt water from your skin. You can shower first if you like. The bathroom is right there.”

“Thank you.” Jack went in to shower. Vishal lay an open terry cloth towel on the couch for Ostin to sit on, then sat down in a wicker chair across from him. “So, Mr. Thomas, where in the U.S. are you from?”

At first Ostin was thrown by his own alias and looked around to see who Vishal was talking to. “Thomas? Oh, right. I’m from, uh, Idaho.”

“Uh-Idaho,” Vishal echoed. “What state is that in?”

Ostin looked at him blankly, then said, “California.”

He nodded. “I know California. Hollywood. Disneyland. Richard Simmons.” He stood. “Just a minute.”

After he was gone, Ostin looked around the room. There was no art and only two framed photographs. As he examined one of them more closely, he realized that the picture inside was really just the stock photo that came with the frame.

A moment later Vishal walked in carrying a bowl and a teacup. “I brought you some Fiji grass tea and fish soup.” He set the cup and the bowl on the coffee table.

“Thank you,” Ostin said, sitting back down. He quickly slurped down the soup while the man watched him. After Ostin had finished the soup, Vishal said, “You were hungry. I’ll get you more.” He took Ostin’s bowl, then walked back out of the room. Just then, Jack walked out of the bathroom. He was dressed in the shorts and T-shirt that Vishal had given him, and his long hair was wet and pulled back.

“Seriously, that shower was life-changing,” Jack said. “Where’s Vishal?”

“He went to get me some more soup.”

Jack sat down next to Ostin. “Is it good?”

“Yeah. But I’m so hungry, I’d call roadkill gourmet.”

Vishal walked into the room carrying a bowl and a plate of reddish-purple chips with a white dip. “Mr. Moki, you are done.”

“Yeah. Thanks. It’s good to get the salt water off. I hope it’s okay that I just left my clothes hanging in there. I washed them in the shower.”

“That will be fine.” He set the bowl and plate in front of Ostin. “This is *rourou*,” he said. “Do you know *dalo*?”

Ostin examined the chips. “Taro chips?”

“Yes. And tapioca.” He stood. “I will get food for Moki now.” Vishal again walked out of the room.

“You guys been talking?”

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“Not much,” Ostin said as Vishal walked back in carrying more tea and soup. He set the food in front of Jack. There was a fish head on top of the soup, the eye looking straight up at him.

“That looks . . . delicious,” Jack said.

“Thank you. I have one more thing.” He went back to the kitchen, returning with a plate of toast spread with butter and mango jam. He put the toast on the table, then sat down across from them. “I hope that’s satisfying.”

“It’s more than satisfying,” Jack said. “Thanks.”

“So, Moki, are you also from California?”

Jack looked up. “California?” He glanced at Ostin. “Uh, yes.”

“Where in California?”

“Same as Ostin,” he said.

Vishal’s brow furrowed. “Ostin? In Texas.”

Ostin quickly interjected. “Sometimes *Moki* calls me Ostin instead of *Thomas* because I used to live in Austin, Texas.”

“Oh,” Vishal said.

“Oh, right,” Jack said, suddenly realizing his mistake.

“But now he also lives in Uh-Idaho.”

Jack just blinked. Ostin’s lies were getting weirder all the time, and he was having trouble keeping up with them.

Ostin finished eating the second bowl of soup, then said, “I think I’ll shower now.”

“I’ll find you some clothes,” Vishal said, standing. “There’s an extra towel in there.”

“Thank you.” Ostin went into the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

The room was small—a porcelain toilet, a sink, and a shower-bath. There was a pink plastic curtain with pictures of tropical fish, and Jack's clothes hung dripping across the shower rod.

Ostin took them down, then took off his own clothes, tossing them into the bathtub and turning on the water. A light flow of warm water streamed out, and he climbed in, letting the water cover him as he lifted his clothes up onto the back of the tub to form a makeshift pillow. Finally he lay back and closed his eyes, water bouncing off his face and chest. He was exhausted, mentally as well as physically. Fear and stress can take a greater toll than physical exertion, and that was the case right now. Suddenly his tears began to mix with the falling water.

It was the first time he'd truly been alone since the battle of Hades, and his thoughts immediately turned to Michael. He quickly pushed the memories out. He missed his friend, but right now it was more than he could handle. He couldn't believe that after all they'd been through, he'd really lost him. And now he might lose McKenna and the rest of his new friends as well. These days, he couldn't believe much of anything in his life. Everything was surreal. He felt like Alice in Wonderland, falling down the rabbit hole. And, like Alice, he hoped that he would just wake and find that it was all a bad dream, and then run over to Michael's house for epic waffles and video games. But it wasn't a dream. And those simple, carefree days were as far gone as his innocence. Nothing was simple anymore. And nothing was carefree.

His thoughts floated to McKenna. She was his first girlfriend, his first kiss, his first love. She was pretty much his first everything. The idea of her being hurt by Hatch made him insane. He knew that it was more about saving her than vengeance on Hatch—not that he didn't want that, too—that was driving him back to Tuvalu. He had to save her—or die trying. Then he pushed those thoughts away as well. It was all too much to make sense of. Way too much, even for a brain the size of his. He fell asleep in the bathtub.



25

Pineapple Pie

Ostin woke to the sound of knocking. “Hey, *Thomas*,” Jack said. “You alive in there?”

Ostin looked around, trying to remember where he was. “Yeah. Sorry. I fell asleep.”

“Save some water for the fish.”

“I’ll hurry.” Ostin got up and quickly washed himself with a bar of soap, rinsed out his clothing, and then hung them up on the rod where Jack’s clothes had been. He turned off the water and got out, hung Jack’s clothes back up next to his own, then dried himself off with a towel.

“Did Vishal come back with some clothes?” Ostin asked.

“Yeah, I put them on the floor outside the door. You’re going to love the shirt.”

Ostin opened the door, reached out, and grabbed the clothes. Folded on top was a pink cotton T-shirt that read:

PROUD TO BE A
FIJIAN
HOTTIE

“What the . . .”

“Pretty awesome, right?” Jack said. “Vishal said it’s the only thing he could find your size.”

“Great,” Ostin said to himself. He looked at the shorts. At least they looked like something a guy would wear. He pulled on the shorts, put the T-shirt on inside out, then came out. Jack and Vishal both looked up at him.

“Your T-shirt’s inside out,” Vishal said.

“It’s the way the cool kids wear it in America,” Ostin said.

“You’re not in America,” Vishal said.

“That’s okay,” Ostin replied. “I’m not one of the cool kids either.”

Jack grinned.

Vishal suddenly stood. “If you’ll excuse me now, I need to go back to work.”

“Vishal leads shark dives,” Jack said. “For tourists.”

“In parts of Fiji, the shark is worshipped as a god,” Vishal said. “Perhaps the one who bit your raft was a great god bringing you to me.”

“Perhaps,” Ostin said. “Thank you for all your help.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll be back around seven o’clock. I think maybe you both need some rest. I have a big bed in that room. You can sleep. When I come back, we’ll get some dinner. In the morning I can drive you to Suva.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Suva?”

“Yes. Your hotel.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Ostin said.

“It’s no problem. It’s only one hundred and eighty-seven kilometers. About a two-hour drive each way,” Vishal said.

“We’ll just take a bus,” Ostin said.

Vishal raised his hand to silence their protests. “It’s no problem. I have friends in Suva that I would like to see. It will be a nice day for a drive. In the meantime, help yourself to anything you’d like to eat. There is pineapple pie in the refrigerator.”

“Thank you,” they both said in unison.

After Vishal walked out of the house, Jack said, “I can’t believe he’s just leaving us alone in his house. We could totally rip him off.”

“They’re trusting people,” Ostin said.

“They’d have to be to fall in with the Elgen.”

“Maybe Vishal is Elgen.”

“Stop that already,” Jack said. “That’s just paranoid. When was the last time an Elgen fed you anything besides Rabisk?” He stood. “Anyway, he’s gone and I need sleep before stealing a boat.”

“Me too,” Ostin said. “Some of that pineapple pie and sleep.”

They walked into the kitchen and helped themselves to large pieces of pie. After they’d eaten, they went into the bedroom. They both stood there looking at the bed.

“Never slept in the same bed as a guy,” Ostin said.

“No big deal,” Jack said, sitting down and taking off his shoes. “In the old days, gold miners used to sleep like six guys to a bed. Probably sounded like a log mill, with all that snoring. You ever share a bed with anyone?”

“No. Maybe with my parents when I was little.”

“When I was little, we only had room for three beds. My parents took one, my sister took one, and I shared a bed with my brother. And he wet the bed.”

“I could have lived the rest of my life not knowing that,” Ostin said.

“Yeah, now he’s a marine.” Jack looked at him. “You don’t wet the bed, do you?”

Ostin looked at him. “No.”

“Good. Because I just got dry clothes.”

* * *

They slept soundly for several hours. It was after sundown when Jack woke to the sound of someone entering the house. Instinctively his first thought was of danger. He lay quietly with one eye opened, focused on the door, watching it slowly open.

Vishal stuck his head inside. “Hello?” He turned on the light. “Wake up, gentlemen. Or you won’t sleep tonight.”

“What time is it?” Jack asked.

“What day is it?” Ostin asked.

Vishal smiled. "It's the same day it was when you came to my beach. And it's dinnertime. I will take you out to dinner. Do you like pizza?"

"We love pizza," Ostin said, suddenly feeling more awake.

"I thought so. Americans love their pizza."



26

Kava Kava

Jack and Ostin followed Vishal out to his car, a white passenger van with the words SHARK REEF DIVERS printed on the side beneath the gaping jaws of a large shark.

“That picture on your van probably scares away customers,” Ostin said after they climbed in.

Vishal said, “Only a few. But it makes it more exciting for the ones who really want adventure.”

“Has anyone ever been attacked by a shark?” Jack asked.

“One of our clients? No. We hit them with a pole if they get too close.”

Ostin looked confused. “You hit the clients or the sharks with the pole?”

Vishal laughed. “Whatever works.”

Vishal looked both ways, then pulled out of the gravel parking lot into the road. He turned on the radio to a local radio station. He drove the van about three miles to downtown Lautoka, parking near a sign that read: GIUSEPPE’S PIZZA INN.

The intersection next to the restaurant had been closed off, and one of the streets was crowded with pedestrians.

“What’s going on there?” Ostin asked.

Vishal turned to look. “It’s the night market. Would you like to walk through before we eat? It’s only a few blocks.”

“That would be great,” Jack said.

“Good,” Vishal said. “I think you’ll find it interesting.”

They walked past the restaurant to the end of the block, then crossed the street, joining the colorful, pressing throng of humanity wandering through the market. Music blared loudly into the warm, moist air, and the road was lined with scores of brightly colored tent awnings illuminated with strings of electric lights.

The street merchants sold a wide range of merchandise, from phone cases and cords to T-shirts and brightly colored bolts of fabric.

Ostin found a T-shirt he would have bought if he had any money. It read:

I’m FIJIAN
... but I won’t eat you.
Probably.

While the majority of the crowd were Fijian natives, there were foreign tourists as well—mostly Asian but some Americans and Europeans. The entire market smelled of food: candied nuts, barbecued meats, fried food bubbling in large metal fryers, and sweets and pastries too numerous to count. There were large tables filled with fruits: pineapples, coconuts, green bananas, and some that even Ostin couldn’t identify. There were all kinds of teas and fruit juices, and some people drank through straws from hairy coconuts.

“Moki, Thomas,” Vishal said, standing in front of a small food stand. “Come try this.” He handed Ostin a plastic bowl with a fork. Ostin took a bite, then handed the bowl to Jack.

“That’s good,” Ostin said. “What is it?”

“It is called *kokoda*. It’s sometimes called Fijian ceviche. My friend here makes it.”

Jack tried it as well. "I like it." He turned to Ostin. "I thought you didn't like raw fish."

"Only when it's still swimming," Ostin said. "Or still breathing."

"The acid in the lemon cooks the fish," Vishal said. "If you would like to continue on, I would like to talk to my friend for a minute."

"Sure," Jack said. "We'll stay on this street."

Vishal walked behind the booth's back wall as Ostin and Jack walked on.

"How are we going to get to Tuvalu?" Jack asked.

"I'm still thinking about it," Ostin said.

"You better think fast. We leave for Suva in the morning."

"I'll figure something out."

Jack looked at him. "Do you think they've reached Tuvalu yet?"

"No. It's only been a day."

"Maybe we should steal a plane," Jack said.

"Then we'd have to kidnap a pilot, too," Ostin said.

They walked a little farther on, until Ostin stopped next to a display of carved wooden forks. "Hey, look. *Iculanibokola*."

"Ikoo-what?"

"Cannibal forks."

"Yes," Vishal said, suddenly walking up to them. "They are a reminder of Fiji's past. These islands were once known for cannibalism." He lifted one of the forks. "Have you ever wondered what human flesh tastes like?"

There was something different about Vishal's voice, an edge to it, and a chill rose up Ostin's spine. "Not once," Ostin said. "Not something I want to know."

"Regardless, I am told that it tastes mostly like pork but is indistinguishable from veal. In the ancient Fiji days there was no refrigeration, so the victim had to be kept alive as long as they could be, to keep the meat fresh."

"Excuse me while I throw up," Ostin said.

Vishal laughed. "Please, not here." Then he walked to the next booth.

As Ostin turned back he suddenly froze. "Jack . . . I mean, Moki . . ."

Jack set down the fork he was holding and looked up. "Yeah?"

About thirty feet in front of them were two men in Elgen guard uniforms.

"Be calm," Ostin said, looking very uncalm. "Just act like tourists."

"They don't look like they're looking for anyone."

"See the patch on their shoulders? Chinese characters with the skull and dragon. Same as the guards at the Taiwan Starxource plant."

Jack stole another glance at them. "The Lung Li?"

"No. The regular guards. Don't stare at them."

Vishal suddenly turned back. His gaze darted back and forth between Ostin and Jack. Then he said, "Is it the men in uniform that concern you? Don't worry, they are not soldiers. They are just security guards for the Elgen Corporation."

"Oh," Ostin said. "What kind of corporation is that?"

"They build electric power plants."

"Never heard of them," Ostin said.

"Curiously, it's an American corporation, but I don't think they are in America. Too much politics. But lately there are many Elgen guards in Fiji," he said, his voice lowering. "*Many*. Over the last few days I've seen more than ever before. There must be some kind of gathering."

"Must be a Starxource plant convention," Ostin said.

Vishal looked at him peculiarly. "Perhaps." He lifted one of the cannibal forks, then said, "Are you ready to eat?"

"Yes," Ostin said, ignoring his reference to the fork. He couldn't figure out why Vishal was behaving so differently. His instincts told him to run.

"Follow me," Vishal said. As they retraced their steps to the main boulevard, Vishal said to Ostin, "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You seem upset."

"I'm just tired."

". . . And hungry," Jack said. "He gets cranky when he's hungry."

"'Hangry,' we call it," Vishal said.

"That's what we call it too," Jack replied.

When they got to the restaurant, there were several large groups of people outside waiting to get in.

“Looks like there’s a long wait,” Jack said.

Vishal opened the door. “Not for us.”

As they walked in past the groups, a man standing at a host table looked up. “Vee,” he said. “So good to see you.”

“And you, Kena. As usual, you are busy tonight.”

“Always busy with the night market,” he said. “But never too busy for you, my friend.” He looked at Ostin and Jack. “And your friends.”

“American,” Vishal said. “California.”

“California,” he replied. “Good pizza. Come with me.” He grabbed three menus and stepped into the crowded restaurant. The three of them followed the man to a table. Kena sat them, then signaled for a server. “Lice will be right with you.”

“Thanks,” Vishal said.

After he walked away, Ostin said, “Our server’s name is Lice?”

Vishal looked at him. “Yes. Is something wrong with that?”

“No,” Ostin said. “Nothing.”

“This place is packed,” Jack said.

“Yes, they have good pizza. Look at the menu. Bacon Cheddar Ham, Taco Pizza, Buffalo Chicken.”

“Look,” Ostin said. “They call this one ‘PizzaMax.’ I love PizzaMax.”

“What’s PizzaMax?” Vishal asked.

“It’s a pizza place in Meridian, Idaho,” Jack said.

Vishal looked confused. “In Uh-Idaho, California?”

“Yes,” Ostin said, glaring at Jack. “In *California*.”

Jack breathed out in exasperation. They ordered a Meaty Max pizza and a Bacon Cheddar. It seemed like months since they’d had bacon, which in Jack’s previous life had been one of his staples. His best friend, Wade, used to experiment with bacon creations, until one day he brought Jack a bacon ice cream shake, which just about ruined Jack’s love for bacon and ice cream.

In addition to the pizza, Jack and Ostin ordered cheese bread and two large sodas. It was a lot of food even for them, but they were hungry and not sure when they would eat again.

Forty minutes later, after they had downed both pizzas, Vishal said, “I have something else for you to try.”

“I don’t think I could eat another bite,” Ostin said.

“You won’t have to,” Vishal said. “It’s a drink.”

“Really, you don’t need to.”

“I insist,” Vishal said. He got up and left the table.

“I’m so full,” Ostin said. “I don’t think I can put anything else down.”

“Well, you better,” Jack said. “It would be rude not to. Especially since he’s getting it just for us.”

A moment later Vishal returned carrying a bowl and a glass of coconut milk. He set them down on the table in front of them. Inside the bowl was a thick black liquid.

“This is something very special,” Vishal said. “It’s a Fijian specialty.” He pushed the bowl toward Ostin. “You try it first.”

Ostin’s stomach groaned, just looking at it.

“Please,” Vishal said.

Ostin glanced up at Jack, who narrowed his eyes at him.

“All right. I’ll try anything once.” He put the bowl to his lip, grimaced, and began to drink. He immediately stopped, his face contorting in pain. He had to force himself not to spit out what was in his mouth. When he had gotten it down, he said, “What is this?”

Vishal grinned darkly. “What do you think it is?”

“It tastes like goat phlegm.”

“You’ve tasted goat phlegm?” Vishal asked.

“No,” Ostin said, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin.

“Then how do you know what it tastes like?”

“I was making a point.”

“Here,” Vishal said, handing Ostin the glass of coconut milk. “Drink some of this. It will take away the bitterness.”

“Thanks,” Ostin said. He took a drink, then said, “‘Bitter’ is kind. More like ‘intensely gross.’”

“You’re being rude,” Jack said.

“You try it,” Ostin said. “See if you like it.” His eyes suddenly widened. “Whoa, my lips are going numb.”

Vishal smiled. “That means it’s good.”

Jack lifted the bowl. “My brother in the marines had to eat raw birds once. This is nothing.” Jack tilted back the bowl. He drank more

than Ostin but also gagged, setting the still full cup in front of him. “What is that?”

“You didn’t like it?”

“No, sir.”

“No, I didn’t think you would. Non-islanders aren’t used to Kava Kava.”

Ostin looked at him. “Wait. This is Kava Kava?”

“You’ve heard of it?” Jack asked, then said, “What am I saying? Of course you’ve heard of it.”

“‘Kava’ means ‘intoxicating pepper,’” Ostin said. “It’s a powerful tea. It can even cause hallucinations. It’s banned in some countries.” Ostin lifted the bowl again and, plugging his nose, took another drink. Then he sat back in his chair. He suddenly felt more relaxed than he had in months. “That feels good.” He sounded funny saying it, as his lips felt like they were the size of loaves of bread.

“Yes,” Vishal said. “It’s very relaxing. Have more.”

Jack took another small drink and gagged again. “Still tastes like dirt.”

“Even the natives who were raised with it don’t like the taste,” Vishal said. “But it feels so good. A small price to pay for a second on the lips.”

Ostin took another sip. A moment later he said, “I swear my chair is vibrating. Is it just me, or is the room getting bigger?”

“That’s the kava,” Vishal said. “How do *you* feel, *Moki*?”

Jack rubbed his forehead. “My ears are ringing.” He took another drink. “Man, I haven’t felt this good since . . . Heather Jennings.”

“Who’s Heather Jennings?”

“This angel . . .”

Ostin closed his eyes. “Wow. This is . . . so . . . peaceful. I . . . feel . . . so . . . peaceful. It’s the kavalact . . . kavalacto . . . kava . . .”

“Kavalactones,” Vishal said. “They are the compound responsible for kava’s psychoactive qualities.”

“Psychoactive,” Ostin said. “I like that word. I’ve always liked that word. I like big words. They’re like those foot-long sandwiches. . . .”

“You sound drunk,” Jack said.

“The people here call it getting *krunked*,” Vishal said.

“Krunked,” Jack repeated. “That’s a funny word.”

“It’s a compound,” Ostin said. “‘Kava’ and ‘drunk.’” He suddenly leaned forward and yawned.

“Now, don’t go to sleep on me,” Vishal said.

“Sorry.”

“So, tell me, Thomas. What were the two of you out fishing for?”

“Fishing?” Ostin said. “When did we go fishing?”

“Fishing,” Vishal said. “That’s what you said you were doing when I found you. Fishing in your raft.”

Ostin laughed a little, then said, “Oh, right. We weren’t really fishing.”

“No?”

“We didn’t even have fishing poles,” Ostin said.

Jack shook his head. “We didn’t even have a raft.”

“Yes, I know, Jack,” Vishal said. “I watched the two of you jump off a very odd-looking boat and swim to shore.”

“Hey, you said Jack’s real name,” Ostin said. “How did you know his real name?”

“You are very poor liars, Ostin, from Meridian, Idaho. Very poor. Tell me, where were you coming from?”

“Hades,” Jack said.

“Hades?” Vishal looked at them quizzically. “The mythical Greek hell?”

“No. Hades in *Tuvalu*.”

Vishal immediately stood, knocking his chair back in the motion. His face was dark. “Do not speak of Tuvalu here,” he said in a hushed but angry burst.

“Hey, it’s cool,” Ostin said. “No harm, no foul. It’s just a bunch of islands—”

“It’s time to go,” Vishal said. “Do not speak to anyone.” He grabbed Ostin by the arm. “Now.”

“Wait,” Ostin said, grabbing the bowl of kava. “I’m not done.”

“Yes, you are,” Vishal said.

“Where are you taking us?” Jack asked.

“Home,” Vishal said.

“I don’t believe you,” Jack said. “I’m not going.”

“Yes, you are,” Vishal said.

“Who’s going to make me?” Jack asked. “You and what army?”

Just then a massive islander walked up behind Vishal. As large as Vishal was, their host was dwarfed compared to the newcomer. The man was almost a foot taller than Vishal and nearly twice as wide. He looked like a mountain of muscle. The man wore dark-lensed aviator sunglasses even though it was night.

“Oh,” Jack said, looking the man up and down. “That army.”

“Wow. You’re a really big dude,” Ostin said. “Like, can you even fit in a car?”

“I think he came to beat us up,” Jack said. “He looks like he’s going to beat us up.”

“I don’t want to get beat up,” Ostin said.

“Whether you get beaten up or not,” Vishal said, “depends on how cooperative you are. That begins by you getting up and walking out with me right now.”

“I’m going,” Ostin said, practically bounding from his chair.

“I’ll go,” Jack said. “I’m in no condition to put up a fight. Actually, I’ve never fought a mountain before. Definitely would lose.”

The man grabbed Jack by the shirt and lifted him.

“Hey. Easy, man; it’s not my shirt.”

He walked Jack out behind Ostin and Vishal.

“Where are we going?” Ostin asked.

“For a drive.”

“That’s not good,” Ostin said. “In the movies, that’s what the bad guys always say before they kill you. That or ‘go for a swim.’”

“Then let’s hope we don’t go near water,” Vishal said.

“Kinda hard when you’re on an island,” Ostin mumbled.

The two men put Jack and Ostin in the backseat of the van. Then the large man sat in the first bench seat, between them and the door.

“Look,” Ostin said. “Big dude *can* fit in a car. But, technically, this isn’t a car. It’s a utility van. You could probably fit a bull in here.” He looked around. “Maybe a small bull.”

“Quiet,” Vishal said.

“Sorry,” Ostin said. He looked at the man who practically took up the entire seat. “Hey, Big Dude. Do you have a name? Or does

everyone just call you 'Big Dude.'”

“His name is not your concern,” Vishal said.

“That’s a really weird name,” Ostin said.

“Be quiet,” Jack said. “Before he punches you.”

“He’s not going to punch me.”

“Then I will,” Jack said.

The large man turned around. “My name is Alveeta,” he said, speaking for the first time, in a voice much higher than either of them expected.

“Alveeta,” Ostin said. “Nice name.”

“Yes. Now shut up, or I will hit you.”

“Yes, Alveeta, sir.”

Jack and Ostin were nearly asleep when they reached an aluminum-sided warehouse near the harbor where they’d come ashore. Vishal got out and opened a chain-link gate, pulled the van through, and then parked behind the building. He shut off the van, then turned back, looking at Ostin and Jack. “We’re all going inside. For your sakes, remain quiet.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack said.

“So let it be written,” Ostin said. “So let it be done.”

“Shut up,” Vishal said.

“Yes, sir,” Ostin said. “It’s the kava.”

Vishal came around and opened the door. Alveeta climbed out first. “Come out. Now.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack said.

As they got to the building’s metal door, Vishal turned around and said to Jack and Ostin, “Let me introduce you to our friends.” He took out a key and unlocked two locks, then opened the door and stepped inside. He turned on the light as Ostin and Jack followed him in.

“I don’t see anyone,” Ostin said.

Alveeta shut the door behind them, and Vishal opened a side door. “Look in here, please.”

Ostin took a step inside the room, then froze. There were three Elgen guards sitting at a table.



An Exploding Friend

“You’re Elgen,” Jack said, suddenly feeling more coherent.

“Of course we are,” Vishal said, shutting the side door. “Who did you think we were?”

“We didn’t think you were anyone,” Ostin said.

“Everyone is someone,” Vishal said. “Alveeta, tie their hands behind their backs.”

As Alveeta took a thin nylon cord from his pocket, Ostin realized that this had been their plan from the beginning.

“You said you had never heard of the Elgen,” Vishal said to Ostin. “Then you made a comment about a Starxource plant.”

“That was pretty stupid,” Ostin said. “Especially for me.”

“And that was before the kava,” Jack said.

“What are you going to do to us?” Ostin asked.

“That depends.”

“On what?” Ostin said.

“On how cooperative you are. You will answer our questions honestly, or we’ll let our Elgen friends know who you really are.

Something tells me that you wouldn't like that."

"How will you know if we're being honest?" Ostin asked.

"We'll interrogate you separately. If we get different answers, we'll know that one of you is lying."

"That's a good idea," Ostin said.

Jack shook his head. "Don't tell them that's a good idea."

"I'll take you first," Vishal said to Ostin. He led him into a side office. There was a simple card table with a metal chair in front of it.

"Sit," he said.

"Yes, sir." Ostin sat.

"We'll begin at the beginning. Who are you?"

"You know who we are."

"I know your first names and where you're from, but that's not knowing who you are, is it? Why did you come to Fiji?"

"The first time or the second time?"

"So you've been here before?"

"Yes, sir."

"The first time."

"To get to Tuvalu."

". . . And the second time?"

"To get *away* from Tuvalu."

Vishal nodded. "What brought you to Tuvalu?"

"You. The Elgen."

"You wish to be an Elgen like us?"

Ostin looked at him like he was a moldy doughnut. "I'd rather be fed to rats."

"That can be arranged. Who are you that you have business with the Elgen?"

"I'm with the Electroclan."

"What is that?"

"It's the resistance against the Elgen."

Vishal looked surprised. "You are young to be a member of a resistance."

"It wasn't my choice. We were dragged into it."

"By whom?"

"You. The Elgen."

“Explain.”

Ostin took a deep breath. “The whole story?”

“Just explain.”

“It started when you made my best friend electric.”

“Jack?”

“No. He’s not my best friend. Well, he kind of is now, but my real best friend died.”

“What do you mean, we made him electric?”

“You don’t know?”

Vishal just looked at him. “Humor me.”

“Elgen Inc. has a machine that alters the physical electrical properties of unborn humans. That’s how you made seventeen electric children.”

“Are you electric?”

“No. Neither is Jack. We’re the only nonelectrics. Nonels. You know what that is.”

Vishal looked at him for a moment, then asked, “Why were you on our boat?”

“We’d stolen it. But then the Philippine Navy captured us. Jack and I were able to escape.”

“How?”

“Your guys were using RESATs to paralyze the electric ones. They didn’t know Jack and I weren’t electric, so we pretended to be paralyzed. Then, when no one was looking, we jumped off the boat.”

“Where are the others now?”

“We think the navy took them back to Tuvalu. The *Joule* didn’t have enough fuel to make it back, so it came to Fiji to refuel. We rode on the side of the ship until we got close to the shore, then jumped off.”

“Why are all these Elgen guards coming to Fiji?”

Ostin looked at him curiously. “You don’t know?”

“Just answer my question.”

“There was a big battle. Most of the Elgen guards were killed. My guess is that Hatch is trying to reinforce the island before the natives find out.”

Vishal suddenly leaned back. “You’re telling me the truth?”

“Yes.”

“We heard rumors that there was a big explosion. A flash that was seen for more than three hundred miles.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What was it?”

Ostin looked down. Suddenly his eyes welled up.

“Well?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

Ostin slowly looked up. “That explosion was my best friend.”



Discretion

Vishal gazed at Ostin for a long time before speaking. “What do you mean, the explosion was your friend?”

Even drunk, Ostin knew that whatever he said would not be believed. “My friend, Michael, had a special weapon. When it detonated, it wiped out almost all of the Elgen.”

“I have heard the island is glass,” Vishal said almost to himself. He stood. “If the Elgen are really that vulnerable, this is good news. It is important news.”

“Wait,” Ostin said. “Are you Elgen or not? Because now you’re talking like you’re not.”

Vishal ignored his question. “If you’re lying, it could cost the lives of thousands of my people. And I guarantee, it will cost you yours.”

“I’m not lying. You can ask Jack.”

“I intend to. And if you’re lying, the punishment will fit the crime.”

“I’m not afraid to die,” Ostin said.

“Really?”

“I’ve accepted it,” he said. “I’ve been lucky before. But luck always runs out. Eventually.”

Vishal looked at Ostin. "How does a boy from Meridian, Idaho, end up in a battle for the island nation of Tuvalu?"

"I've asked myself that many times."

"And what's the answer?"

"The Elgen kidnapped my best friend's mother. We went to save her."

Vishal was quiet again.

"May I ask you a question?" Ostin said.

Vishal looked at him.

"Who are *you*?"

Vishal tapped his pencil on the table, then looked up at Ostin and said, "I am a Tuvaluan and the leader of the Tuvaluan resistance. I was sailing home from purchasing new scuba equipment in Fiji when I received an emergency radio broadcast that Tuvalu had been invaded. I returned to Fiji, only to find that all communication from Tuvalu had been knocked out.

"There were about two hundred of us Tuvaluans stranded here at that time, and maybe a hundred more who were in Australia or New Zealand and flying back. Against our counsel, a few went back to Tuvalu. We have not heard from them since. We all have family and friends in Tuvalu. We plan to rescue them. That is why your news is of such importance to me."

Ostin nodded. "That's why you found us."

"It was not a coincidence that I was there when you came ashore. I had received word that an Elgen boat was nearing Fiji. I was watching it through binoculars when I saw you jump off the side of it a few hundred meters from shore. I needed to find out who you were and what you knew."

"Why do you have those Elgen guards?"

"We have been capturing them to gain information and to keep them from joining the Elgen force."

"We should take their uniforms," Ostin said. "We've disguised ourselves as Elgen guards before. Now what are you going to do?"

"First I'm going to untie you," he said. He walked around the table and untied the knots.

Ostin stretched out his arms, then rubbed his wrists. "Thank you."

“Tell me your plans,” Vishal said.

“Jack and I are trying to get back to Tuvalu to rescue our friends.”

“Then we have similar goals. We’re both trying to get back to Tuvalu.”

“And we have a common enemy,” Ostin added.

“Do my people know that the Elgen are vulnerable?”

“I don’t think so. But they will. There’s a man we fought with named Enele Saluni. He was going to gather his people to fight.”

Vishal looked at him with surprise. “You know Enele Saluni?”

“He fought in the battle of Hades with us.”

“I feared Enele was dead.”

“He almost was. We rescued him from the Elgen prison.”

“Where is his grandfather, Prime Minister Saluni?”

Ostin frowned but didn’t answer.

Vishal turned pale. “Then he is dead.”

“No,” Ostin said slowly, shaking his head. “Worse. Much worse.”

Vishal leaned forward. “What have they done to that good man?”

“Hatch cut out his tongue, then put him in a monkey cage in the center of Nike.”

Vishal turned pale. “Who is this Hatch?”

“He’s the Elgen leader.”

Vishal shook his head. “What is Nike?”

“It’s the name Hatch gave the main island. Funafuti. He renamed all the islands. Like Hades.”

Vishal’s face turned dark with anger. “The Elgen are not worthy of being called beasts,” he said, choking on his words. “Where is Enele?”

“We gave his men the lifeboats from the *Joule* so they could return to their homes. He planned to gather the natives and lead a revolution against the Elgen, but he wouldn’t know that the Elgen have already begun rebuilding their forces.”

“Then we must hurry to their aid before the Elgen are strong again,” Vishal said. He looked at Ostin. “Will you fight with us?”

“Of course. We were planning to fight without you,” Ostin said. “I need to rescue my friends. But first we need a way back.”

Vishal stood. “If you will fight with us, I will take you back myself.”

* * *

Jack was surprised to see the change in Vishal's and Ostin's demeanors as they walked from the office. They almost looked like friends.

"Alveeta," Vishal said. "Release Jack. These men are not our enemies."

Alveeta looked as surprised as Jack did. "How do you know this?"

"Because I have questioned him, and what he says adds up. And he knows Enele Saluni."

Alveeta looked at Ostin warily. "Why would you trust this boy? He has done nothing but try to deceive us since he arrived."

"As did we," Vishal said. "In such days, discretion is the better part of wisdom. Trust me, he is with us."

Alveeta walked over and untied Jack's hands. Jack rubbed his wrists. "What's going on, man?" he asked. "If you're not Elgen, who are you?"

Ostin said, "They're Tuvaluans. We're going to help them, and they're going to help us."

"We need to assemble everyone immediately," Vishal said to Alveeta. "The Elgen are vulnerable right now. That's why the guards have been gathering. The great explosion we heard about destroyed most of the Elgen forces. I'm going to put out the call." He walked back into his office.

After he was gone, Alveeta asked Jack, "Do you know Enele too?"

Jack nodded. "We fought together."

"Is he still alive?"

"He was the last time I saw him," Jack said. "You know him?"

"He was my friend," Alveeta said. "We went to grade school together."

"He fought bravely," Jack said. "He helped us hold the prison."

"You are fortunate to have fought with him. You get to know a man in battle."

"Something tells me you'll be getting to know us all better real soon," Jack replied.



29

Gathering the Resistance

“It’s a good thing we had that nap earlier,” Ostin said to Jack. “I don’t think we’re getting any sleep tonight.”

Jack watched the doors as more and more people filed into the warehouse. “I think you’re right,” he said.

Within an hour of Vishal’s first phone call, there were more than fifty Tuvaluans gathered in the warehouse. By midnight there were more than two hundred. There were both men and women, but the majority were men.

“How many are missing?” Vishal asked, standing on a wooden crate to look over the crowd.

“I know of a few who have left Fiji,” one of the men said.

“Where is Rynal?”

“I’m right here.” The squat man behind the voice approached. “Sorry I’m late. What’s this emergency?”

“We’ll begin,” Vishal said. He walked to the front of the room. “Your attention, please.” When the room didn’t silence, he took off his shoe and slammed it against the wall. The room silenced.

“We have just received the information we’ve been waiting for. The flash of light Rynal reported seeing four days ago was a verified explosion.”

“What kind of explosion?” one of the men asked. “Do they have nuclear weapons?”

“We know little about the explosive,” Vishal said. “Except it was used *against* the Elgen. But our sources have told us two important things. First, the Elgen army was mostly destroyed in the explosion. That is why Fiji has recently been flooded with Elgen guards. The leader of the Elgen, Admiral-General Hatch, is calling in his guards from around the world.”

“There are many new guards in Vanuatu and Samoa as well,” a woman said.

“My cousin in Tonga says the same,” said someone else in the crowd, nodding.

“They are clearly calling them in,” Vishal said. “Which only adds to the validity of the report. Second, Enele Saluni is still alive. He is gathering forces among our people. It is our hope to unite with him and help him overthrow the Elgen.”

There was a notable rise in noise from the crowd.

“Where is he?” someone asked. “Where’s Enele?”

“We’re not sure,” Vishal said.

Someone shouted from the crowd, “Who are these sources we’ll be risking our lives for?”

“*A ia e fui talia*,” Vishal muttered to Ostin. “This man’s name is Namase. He agrees with much difficulty.”

“Who is it?” Namase repeated.

“I can’t tell you,” Vishal said. “Only that they will be going with us into battle.”

“. . . Or into a trap.”

“It’s not a trap,” Vishal said.

“Do you know that? Who are these sources of yours? How could they know what’s going on in Tuvalu? No one gets in or out.”

“We did,” Jack said, standing. “And it’s not a trap. It’s not going to be a cakewalk either, but if you want to take out the Elgen, this is the best chance you’re ever going to get.”

Everyone turned and looked at him.

Namase eyed him. "Who are you?"

"I'm Jack. I'm with the Electroclan."

"What's 'Electroclan'?"

"I know that boy," someone shouted. "He was with J.D. when they sailed to Tuvalu. J.D. never came back."

"J.D. was a traitor," Ostin said. "Why do you think the Elgen allowed him to sail to their islands?"

"They are not *their* islands," someone shouted. "They are *ours*! And our children's!"

"That's not what I meant," Ostin said. "J.D. was paid by the Elgen to deliver us to them."

"Why would the Elgen want you?" Namase asked.

"They don't want me. They wanted the rest of our group. The electric ones."

"The boy in the girl's shirt makes no sense."

"It's not my shirt," Ostin said. "The Elgen accidentally created seventeen electric children. They have been gathering them. We went there to rescue them."

"And how did you get out?"

"We stole their submersible boat. But before we got here, we were stopped by the Philippine Navy."

"I can verify that," Rynal said. "I flew over them. There were three navy ships, one of them a full battle cruiser. They had surrounded a strange-looking boat. They were taking people off of it."

"And I saw them jump off the boat," Vishal said.

"That's when we escaped," Ostin said. "We're the only two who weren't electric."

"Where is the boat now?" Namase asked.

"It left this afternoon," Vishal said. "I would guess back to Tuvalu."

Namase exploded. "You think we're fools? You think we believe this crazy story of submerging boats and electric children? Why would we listen to this boy in a girl's shirt?"

"Enough with the shirt already," Ostin said.

Vishal turned red in the face. "I don't care what you believe, Namase. Stay here with the cowards. But you'll never return to

Tuvalu with your head up.”

“None of us with a head on our shoulders will ever return to Tuvalu,” Namase said. “And those of you fool enough to believe stories of electric children are just fools who are going to follow this man into slavery or death.”

Suddenly a low voice from the back of the room said, “The electric children are real.”

Everyone turned to see who had spoken. An elderly, silver-haired man stood against the back wall, leaning on a cane. One of his legs was in a cast. He was Maatia Maani, a respected Tuvaluan elder and former government minister. He had been meeting with Fijian officials when the Elgen attacked Tuvalu. But it was not respect for his government office that silenced the crowd; it was respect for his position as island elder. There were only three elders left in Tuvalu, and they were regarded with deity-like respect. Everyone silenced to hear what he had to say.

Maatia blinked as he panned the quiet room with his ancient, dark eyes. “The electric children this young man speaks of are real. I have seen them with my own eyes.”

He said something to the young man next to him, then began limping forward, leaning heavily on his cane, with the young man at his side. The crowd parted for him as he hobbled to the front of the room. When he reached the front, he bowed slightly to Vishal, then turned back to face the crowd.

“A month before the Elgen attack, I was riding my bicycle on Funafuti near the Elgen power plant when I came upon two Americans, a boy and a girl about these young people’s ages,” he said, pointing at Jack and Ostin. “They were throwing stones at a dog. Hurting the dog. I told them to stop. They were very disrespectful and told me to mind my own business. They called me many names that I think they did not think I would understand. I told them that they had poor manners and should respect the elderly.

“The young woman said to me, ‘Maybe you should respect the *young* or you might get hurt.’ Then she reached out her hand, and like magic my bike was pulled out from under me, as if she were a powerful magnet. I fell hard to the ground. That is how I broke my

leg.” He frowned. “They both laughed when I fell. They enjoyed that a great deal.”

Indignation rose in the room.

“They will pay,” someone shouted. “Who are these youths?”

Maatia raised his hand to silence them. “. . . After I fell, the young man walked over to me. He smiled at me; then he put his hand over my bicycle. Electric sparks came out of his hand. He cut my bicycle in half. I thought I was watching a demon.”

“I saw the bicycle with my own eyes,” the young man next to him said. “It was cut in two pieces. The metal was melted in a way I’d never seen before.” He turned back to the elder. “My apologies for interrupting, Elder.”

“Thank you for sharing your testimony.” The old man looked around. “I have seen many peculiar things in my life but nothing as peculiar as those two youths.”

“That would be Kylee and Bryan,” Jack said. “They’re two of Hatch’s Glows. They’re bad news.”

“There were seventeen kids born with electric power,” Ostin said. “Each of their powers is different. Some of them are with the Elgen, like Bryan and Kylee; the rest are now against them. But now the Elgen have captured all of them. After what they did to his army, we’re pretty sure he’ll kill them.”

Vishal turned to the crowd. “Do you believe me now? Or will you deny the testimony of Elder Maani and these young friends who have already risked their lives fighting our battle for us?”

“No,” Namase said humbly. “My apologies.”

Vishal looked around the room. “Time is against us. Every day the Elgen force will grow in strength. We must sail as soon as possible. Nikhil, you have the fastest boat. Alveeta, the Americans and I will go with you and your crew. We will find Enele, then radio everyone to join forces.”

“Do we have weapons?” Jack asked.

“We have some,” Vishal said.

“The Elgen have enough weapons to equip a large army.”

Vishal looked at Jack as if he were unimpressed. “Then we will have to borrow theirs.”

* * *

The Tuvaluans spent a sleepless night gathering weapons and supplies for the three-day journey to Tuvalu. As the dawn sun began to rise above the turquoise blue South Pacific, there were, in all, one hundred and sixty-four men and eight women who had volunteered to fight. The remaining forty-six women and twelve men joined together to make a plan to slow the Elgen guards' departure from Fiji to Tuvalu, using Fijian travel regulations. This was Elder Maani's idea.

"Even the smallest of us can keep ten or more Elgen guard from joining the battle through paperwork and regulations or whatever means available," the elder said. "Oftentimes in war, more damage is done by a bureaucrat with a pen than a soldier with a rifle."

One of the young women added, "Or a woman with a smile. It was a pretty woman who kept the British from attacking the American colonial army when they were at their weakest."

The elder nodded. "A pretty face is a powerful weapon indeed."

* * *

While the Tuvaluans made their preparations, Ostin and Jack spent most of the night with Vishal, writing notes on the island maps, detailing what they knew of where the Elgen strongholds were. The most important question they couldn't answer was where Enele was and how they would find him.

"If I were him," Jack said. "I would first rescue my grandfather."

Ostin shook his head. "I don't think so. Nike is the Elgen's stronghold. With a force that small, even surviving Elgen guards could stop them. I think Enele is patient. He will gather men and weapons first, then free his grandfather. Prime Minister Saluni has already been imprisoned since Hatch took over. What's a few more days?"

Alveeta nodded. "I think little Ostin is right. The Enele I know is not one to let his heart outrun his brain."

Ostin looked at the map of Tuvalu. He put his finger on Hades, then moved it down. "If I were him, I would go to where the largest potential number of soldiers were located." He touched the map.

“That would be here, the closest island, Nanumaga. That’s where the Elgen grow their food. It will be filled with hundreds of young, strong workers. They’ll also need food and water; both would be plentiful there. The only thing they won’t have is weapons.”

“Then where?” Jack said.

Ostin studied the map again, then said, “The next closest island is Nui, the Elgen’s science island, where the *Volta* is docked. But there’s nothing there for them except scientists. Like I said, they may gather people on Nanumaga, but without weapons they’re not soldiers. The most likely way for them to secure weapons would be to sail south to Vaitupu. That’s where the Elgen train their guards and dock their warships. Before the battle of Hades it would have been suicide to go there, but I’m guessing that it’s probably only guarded now by a skeleton crew of a few dozen guards.”

Jack said, “Enele’s forces would probably land there after dark, when they are less likely to be seen.”

Ostin’s forehead furrowed. “Not necessarily. The Elgen have advanced night-vision technology, which would give them the advantage. If they attack during the day, they’re on equal ground. Or might even have the advantage since they are better hunters and know the land better.”

“So the real question,” Vishal said, “is, would Enele think of all that?”

“How long would it take them to get from Nanumaga to Vaitupu?” Jack asked.

“That depends on what boats they are able to secure from Nanumaga. If there are none and they keep the *Joule*’s tenders, it will take them two days.”

Jack nodded. “After Vaitupu, where would he go?”

“The only other island between Vaitupu and Funafuti is Nukufetau,” Ostin said, “the one Hatch renamed Plutus. That’s where the *Joule* was docked. But there’s no reason for them to go there, so I’m guessing that Enele would bypass it and sail directly to here”—Ostin drew his finger in an arc around the east side of the island—“landing on the northeastern side of Funafuti.”

“That side of the island is very much jungle,” Alveeta said.

“Yes. If they have many people, it would give them the cover to land and move in toward the Starxource plant. And,” Ostin said, looking at Jack, “rescue his grandfather.”

“I do not think they will stop in Vaitupu,” Vishal said. “Family is all in Tuvalu. Enele might stop in Nanumaga for supplies, but then he would go to Funafuti to rescue his grandfather.”

“But would he go without weapons?” Ostin said as he looked away from the map.

“Would they not find weapons on Nanumaga?”

“Where there are Elgen, there are weapons,” Jack said.

“If we sail to Vaitupu and they’ve already started to attack Funafuti, we will be too late to help,” Alveeta said.

Ostin rubbed his head. “We could really use Ian right now.”

“Who is Ian?” Vishal asked.

“He’s one of the electricians,” Jack said. “He can see for miles and miles.”

“I can see for many thousands of miles,” Alveeta said.

Ostin looked at him. “You can?”

“Yes. Every night I look up at the stars.”

“Not what we meant,” Ostin mumbled to himself.

“All right,” Vishal said, looking exhausted. “We sail to Funafuti and hope he is there.”

“What do you think of that?” Jack quietly asked Ostin.

Ostin rubbed his chin, then said, “I just hope that Enele is a better strategist than Vishal.”

* * *

With the exception of those still loading the boats, the Tuvaluans met for a final time in the warehouse.

“*Talofa*,” Vishal said to those gathered before him. “Many centuries ago our people defended themselves from the people who came by canoe from the Fijian islands. Today we come from the Fijian islands not to steal our lands but to reclaim them, the land of our ancestors’ bones. *Konei, e o ai? E o koulua*. These lands are ours, not the Elgen’s.

The spirits of our ancestors will travel with us. We go not by canoe but by modern boats. But the spirit is the same.

“Rynal will fly ahead of our boats and send us reports of any Elgen activity. We’ll stay far enough apart from each other to not arouse suspicion, but close enough to be of protection to each other. We may encounter other boats as the Elgen guard arrive. Those who stay behind will do what they can to stop those coming from Fiji, and they will let us know what boats make it off the island, so that we can look for them. We will sink them before they make it to Tuvalu.

“When we reach Niulakita, you will dock on the southeast shore and wait until you receive word from me. We will go ahead of you to Funafuti, seeking Enele and his warriors. When we find them, we will alert you before we attack the Elgen stronghold. Not a minute before.” He looked over the tired but impassioned patriots. “There is much danger ahead. I fear that much blood will wet the soil of our home. But we will be courageous and we will not fail.” He pounded his chest. “Tuvaluans, be of great strength.”

The group returned the greeting, likewise striking their chests. “Be of great strength.”

“That was a good speech,” Jack said as Vishal walked back to him.

Vishal did not smile. “Let’s hope it’s not my last.”

* * *

The group moved silently out of the warehouse. Ostin and Jack followed Vishal, Alveeta, Nikhil, and two of his crewmen out to Nikhil’s boat. There were already three other crewmen on board.

In all, there were twenty-one vessels in the Tuvaluan armada. They were mostly commercial fishing or transport ships, with the exception of Nikhil’s boat, which was a high-speed commercial touring yacht called the *MAS*.

“What’s ‘MAS’ stand for?” Ostin asked Vishal as they boarded.

“I don’t know. Nikhil won’t tell anyone.”

Nikhil overheard the question. “It means whatever you want it to.”

“What does it mean to you?”

“That’s for me to know.”

Ostin climbed aboard the boat. When Nikhil was out of earshot, he asked Jack, “What do you think it stands for?”

He shrugged. “‘Maniac at steering wheel.’ How about you?”

“Well, in Spanish ‘*más*’ means ‘more.’ But MAS is also an acronym for the disease macrophage activation syndrome, which, as you know, is a life-threatening complication of rheumatic disease. But then I thought, why would he name his boat after a disease, especially one that occurs much more frequently in juveniles than adults?”

Jack looked at him in wonder. “Does your brain ever want to, like, explode?”

“Brains don’t explode. Unless you want to define an intracranial aneurism as an explosion; arguably a rupture could be called—”

“Stop, stop,” Jack said, holding up his hand. He walked down a stairway belowdecks, talking to himself. “I wish someone would explode my brain.”



30

Two Dreams

The sun had just begun to creep above the horizon as the boats, one by one, headed out to sea. The sea was as calm as it had been the day Jack and Ostin had arrived in Fiji. Vishal spent most of the day in the cabin with Captain Nikhil, studying maps and communicating with other boats. By the end of the first day, the fleet was spread out more than ten miles. No Elgen were spotted, but there was one incident that slowed the fleet down. One of the older boats broke down and had to be abandoned, its passengers, cargo, and fuel distributed among the other ships.

The atmosphere on the *MAS* was tense, and most of her occupants kept to themselves. The beautiful weather felt like a lie, since everyone knew there were war clouds ahead. It seemed that with each mile the tension grew still greater. At one point, Jack took one of the guns they'd stored belowdecks and went to the back of the boat to shoot. The diversion didn't last long because Nikhil sent one of his crew back to tell Jack to stop wasting ammunition.

Ostin was glad when the sun began its descent into the rippling-orange sea and he and Jack went belowdecks to the berths. Ostin lay

on the middle of three bunks; Jack lay on the bottom. An hour after they'd gone to bed, Ostin rolled over in his bunk toward the outside edge. "Jack. You awake?"

There was a long pause, then Jack said, "If I said *no*, would that stop you from talking?"

"That would be illogical, because—"

"Stop," Jack said. "What do you want?"

"I was just thinking they should almost be there by now."

Jack didn't respond.

"What do you think Hatch will do to them?"

Jack was silent for a moment, then said, "I don't want to think about it."

"Me neither. Do you think *we're* going to live through this?"

"I don't know."

"What's your gut feeling?"

"You don't want to know," Jack said.

"I really do."

"I didn't think we were going to live through the battle of Hades."

"Me neither. If it wasn't for Michael, we wouldn't have."

Jack sighed. "How many guards do you think Hatch will bring in?"

Ostin thought it over. "The short answer?"

"Sure."

"However many he needs to feel safe."

"What's the long answer?"

"At last count there were seventy-two operating Starxource plants. I've never seen less than twenty guards at each plant we've been in, but they run 24/7, so if they keep eight-hour shifts, triple that number. That would make for four thousand three hundred and twenty guards at plants. If Hatch keeps a skeleton crew on each plant and pulls in two-thirds of them, that would be approximately two thousand eight hundred and eighty guards on their way to Tuvalu. Of course that's all speculation."

Jack groaned. "Almost three thousand highly trained, armed guards against one hundred seventy-four of us. I don't like those odds."

"Last time we fought them off with less."

"Yeah, and we had the Electroclan."

“. . . And Michael,” Ostin said.

“That’s why we’ve got to find Enele and his army,” Jack said.

“What if we don’t find them?”

“Then we go with plan B.”

“Plan B? What’s plan B?”

Jack said softly, “We are the army.”

Ostin rolled back over and closed his eyes. He didn’t want to ask any more questions.

* * *

Not surprisingly, neither Jack nor Ostin slept well that night. Ostin didn’t fall asleep until after three in the morning. He woke several hours after sunrise to see Jack sitting on the bunk opposite him eating something.

“What’s for breakfast?” Ostin.

“Coconut granola bars.” Jack threw him one. “How’d you sleep?”

Ostin began to unwrap the bar. “Bad.”

“Me too,” Jack said.

“I had the weirdest dream. The weirdest part was that it seemed so real. I could almost swear it was real.”

“That’s bizarre,” Jack said. “I did too. Tell me yours first.”

“I was lying in bed when I suddenly saw Michael. He was just standing there, his feet a few inches off the floor. And I could kind of see through him, except he was so bright. Like a fluorescent lightbulb.”

“Hold on,” Jack said. “You dreamed that Michael was, like, floating in the air, right here next to us?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the exact same dream I had. Except, in my dream, he gave me a message. He said we would find Enele on . . . He said two places, one started with an *N*, the other with an *P*. Sounded like a planet . . . Pluto.”

“*Plutus*,” Ostin said. “He said to find Enele we needed to go to the island Hatch calls *Plutus*, the one the Tuvaluans call *Nukufetau*. He said Enele was sent there by . . .”

“. . . Elder Malakite . . . ,” Jack said.

“Malakai,” Ostin corrected. “He went to talk to him before going to war.”

“Dude, we had the exact same dream. Except it was like you said, it didn’t seem like a dream.”

“Maybe it wasn’t a dream.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe that really was Michael.”

Suddenly Jack’s expression changed. “Stop,” he said. “Don’t even go there. Michael’s dead. Just like Wade and Tanner and Gervaso.”

“But what if he isn’t?”

“I *said*, stop it,” Jack said angrily. “It’s just wrong.”

“Then explain the dream.”

Jack took a deep breath. “I can’t.”

Ostin climbed out of his bunk. “Just a minute.” He walked out of the room, returning a moment later with a pen and piece of paper. He wrote something down on the paper, then folded it into a square.

“What are you doing?” Jack said.

Ostin handed the paper to Jack. “I’m telling you, I don’t think it was just a dream. At the end of the dream, just before Michael left, he said something very specific. Do you remember?”

Jack thought for a moment, then said, “Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He said something like, ‘You will be attacked. But hold on. I will be there when I can.’ Then he said, ‘Look for the . . .’ It was a really weird word, sounded like ‘*hurry at you.*’”

Ostin said, “Open the paper.”

Jack unfolded the piece of paper. Ostin had written:

*You will be attacked. Hold on.
I will be there when I can. Look for the Uira te Atua.*

Jack looked up. “How did you do that?”

“It wasn’t a trick,” Ostin said. “That’s what he said to me too.”

Jack was speechless.

“What if Michael isn’t dead, just *changed*?”

“What do you mean, changed?”

“Energy can’t be created nor destroyed; it just changes from one form to another. Just like chemical energy can’t be destroyed, but it can be converted into kinetic energy.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” Jack said. “What’s kinetic energy?”

“It’s energy in motion. For instance, if you take nitroglycerin, a chemical compound, and detonate it, like in dynamite, you’ve changed chemical energy to kinetic energy.”

“What’s your point?”

“Hear me out,” Ostin said. “This is just a *what if*, but before Hades, Michael was becoming more and more electric—he was becoming more *energy* and less *matter*. What if, then, when the lightning struck him, it completed the process and he became pure energy?”

“And then he couldn’t be destroyed,” Jack said.

“No. He was converted to kinetic energy, which changed to thermal energy, like a nuclear blast.”

“But then, after the explosion, he’s gone.”

“Not really,” Ostin said. “What if he is trapped in some kind of energy field and he’s trying to reestablish himself? Taylor said he appeared to her but didn’t say anything. We both saw him and he spoke to us. That means his consciousness is still attached to his energy. It also means he’s starting to figure himself out.”

“Then Michael is . . . energy?”

“We’re all energy,” Ostin said. “Michael’s just *pure* energy. Einstein believed that energy could be turned into matter, which, in 1997, was proven when a linear collider, using a high-powered electron beam and an electric field, was able to collide the photons in a way to produce matter.”

Jack shook his head. “I have no idea what you just said.”

“What I just said is that I believe that Michael is pure energy trying to convert himself back into matter.”

“You mean, you think Michael’s trying to come back?”

Ostin looked at him. “I think he already has.”



Changing Course

“The problem now,” Jack said, standing up from his bunk, “is how do we tell Vishal we need to change destinations?”

“We just tell him the truth,” Ostin said.

Jack frowned. “The *truth*? You want to tell Vishal that Michael appeared to us like a ghost? He’d have us thrown overboard.”

Ostin thought on that. “Yeah, he wouldn’t go for that.”

“We could tell him that we suddenly remembered that Enele told us he was going to Nukufetau.”

“We just suddenly remembered? He’s not going to buy that. That’s not something you’d forget.” Ostin thought a little more, then said, “I think we just tell him that we both had the same dream.”

“A dream. How’s that any different from a ghost story?”

Ostin shook his head. “These native guys put a lot of stock in dreams.”

After a moment Jack said, “Can’t hurt.” Then added, “Too much.”

Ostin pulled on his shirt. Then they both walked up to the boat’s cab. Nikhil was wearing aviator sunglasses and was seated in the captain’s chair, holding the wheel. Vishal was seated a few meters

from him. Both men looked tired. Vishal turned back as they entered. He spoke above the sound of the ocean. "What's up?"

"We need to talk to you," Jack said.

"Yeah? Go ahead."

"Can we go outside?"

Nikhil glanced at Vishal but said nothing.

"Sure," Vishal said.

He followed them out the portside door. It was another clear day, and to the southwest there was the pale silhouette of one of their other boats. The sound of the boat's engines and the hydroplaning of the boats on the waves was the only real noise.

"What's on your minds, guys?"

"We think we need to change destinations," Jack said.

Vishal looked back and forth between them. "We already went through this. What are you up to?"

"Nothing," Jack said. "It's just . . . last night we both had the same dream." He looked at Ostin. "You explain."

"We dreamed that our friend Michael came to us in the night. He told us both the exact same thing."

Vishal looked at them skeptically. "Which was . . .?"

"That we will find Enele on Nukufetau."

Vishal shook his head. "Why would he go to Nukufetau? There is no reason at all for them to go there." He frowned. "We already spoke of this back in Fiji. It was either Vaitupu or Funafuti. We're sticking with Funafuti."

"But we had a dream," Ostin said.

"A dream?" Vishal said, his voice sharp with annoyance. "Shall I lead these people to their deaths because of a dream you had? We've made our plans. We'll follow them."

"It was a dream we *both* had," Jack said.

"Okay, shall I lead them to their deaths because of a dream you both had?"

Jack shook his head. "You've got to admit that's weird."

"In the world of dreams, everything is weird."

Ostin said, "In the dream, our friend said that Elder Malakai sent Enele to Nukufetau."

Vishal's expression suddenly changed. "Who did you say?"

"Malakai. The elder."

"How did you know that name?"

"It was in the dream," Jack said.

Vishal suddenly looked worried. "'Malakai' is a name only known by a few. You could not have known that name."

"In our dream, Michael told us that Enele had gone to see Malakai in Nui."

Again Vishal looked surprised. "How did you know that the great elder was on Nui? That is information that had been kept very secret."

"The dream," Ostin said. "He said Enele went there to get Malakai's blessings before going to war."

"That is our way. We consult the elders before battle. Just as we did in Fiji." Vishal looked back and forth between the two of them. "Did he say anything else?"

"He said something about the *Uira te Atua*."

Vishal turned white. "How do you know that phrase? It is sacred, in an ancient language, known only to a few."

"We told you," Jack said. "That's what he said in the dream."

"We're not making this up," Ostin said.

"No," Vishal said. "No one could have made that up."

Jack looked at Vishal seriously. "What do you think?"

Vishal took a deep breath, then breathed out slowly. "I think we better change course to Nukufetau."

PART THIRTEEN



The Rebels

EGG Amon walked anxiously into Hatch's office, carrying news he didn't want to share. "Admiral-General, sir, I've two messages to deliver."

Hatch looked up from the financial report he was reviewing. "Give me the bad news first."

Amon took a deep breath, subconsciously preparing for Hatch's explosion. "We've just received notice that the *Edison* has been sunk."

Hatch stared at the EGG in disbelief. "By whom?"

"The rebels."

"The rebels?" Hatch's face began to turn red. "The rebels were on unarmed, slow-moving cattle ships. The *Edison* is a Kirov-class anti-ship, anti-submarine battle cruiser." Hatch slammed down his fist. "You don't sink a battle cruiser with a cattle boat!"

"It was a suicide attack, sir. One of the rebel boats was filled with explosives and managed to get behind the *Edison*."

Hatch walked over to his bar and poured himself a Scotch, downing the drink in one gulp. Then he turned back to Amon and,

speaking in a more composed voice, asked, "Where are the rebels now?"

"They've taken refuge inside the depository."

Hatch poured himself another drink and drained it. "You're telling me that they managed to take over one of the most secure buildings in the world?"

"Apparently, sir."

"Of course they did," Hatch said. "And how, exactly, did that happen?"

"We don't know, sir. We believe human error."

"You think?!" Hatch groaned loudly. "Human error!" He threw the glass against the wall mirror, shattering both it and the mirror. "The whole human race is an error. Which is exactly why the sooner we've eliminated the human being from this planet, the better. What is the status of the rebel boats?"

"The *Edison* managed to take out all the rebel boats except the *Proton*, the smallest of the agricultural boats. They also have a few lifeboats and rafts."

Hatch looked at the map of the islands he'd mounted on the wall. "Plutus is within range of our Apache helicopters. I want you to order an attack on whatever they're floating on. We don't have the men or time to wage war on them right now, but at least we can strand them on the island. We'll make the island itself a prison, like Alcatraz in San Francisco. Once we've rebuilt the guard, we'll take the rebels apart. On our timetable, not theirs."

"Yes, sir."

"You said you had two messages."

"Yes, sir. I've also received notice that Captain Shool of the Philippine Navy has reached Nukulaelae."

"Where?"

Amon realized his error and slightly bowed. "Excuse me, Admiral. I meant the island of *Dionysus*, the island *formerly* known as Nukulaelae."

"It's about time. Is the *Joule* with them?"

"No, sir. The *Joule* was delayed with refueling. She'll be arriving four hours later."

“And she’s safe?”

“Yes. She is being accompanied by one of the Filipino battle cruisers.”

“Very well.”

“They made good time, sir. Less than fifty hours.”

Hatch went back to his report without comment. Amon continued to stand at attention. After another minute Hatch asked, “What is it, EGG?”

“Will you be greeting Captain Shool, sir?”

“No,” Hatch said. “It’s still too dangerous for me to leave the plant.”

“Sir, someone must greet him. It’s protocol.”

Hatch looked up from his papers. “I had no intention of leaving him unattended, EGG. You and a contingency of guards will greet the captain and bring him back to the plant along with their prisoners.”

“Yes, sir. You mean Welch and the Glows.”

“That’s exactly who I mean.” Then a slow, angry smile spread over Hatch’s lips. “You have no idea how excited I am to see Welch again. And my Glows. My only problem is deciding what I am going to do with them. So many traitors, so many possibilities.”

“Yes, sir.”

“On second thought, EGG, maybe I will greet the captain. I want to see Welch’s face when he comes off the ship. Radio me when they are docking.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You can go, EGG.”

“Yes, sir,” Amon said. Then he spun around and quickly walked away.

* * *

Two hours later, Hatch, flanked by Amon and a half dozen guards, greeted the Filipino captain as he walked down the gangplank onto the Elgen dock.

“Captain Shool,” Hatch said, stepping forward. “Welcome to the Hatch Islands.”

The captain saluted. “Admiral Hatch. It’s an honor.”

“The pleasure is mine, Captain. You have our prisoners?”

“Seventeen of them, Admiral. Including the one you call Welch.”

Hatch smiled. “Congratulations, Captain, on a well-executed operation. Such competency will not go unrecognized. I will see to it that President Bautista is informed of your success.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Where are your prisoners now?”

“They’re still in the brig awaiting your orders.”

“Very well. Have Welch brought to me immediately. In chains, of course.”

“Of course, sir.”

Captain Shool turned to one of his guards and spoke quickly in his native tongue. The guard ran back up the gangplank into the boat.

“It seems that all went well with the capture of the mutineers.”

“Yes. The machines you gave us were quite remarkable. They paralyzed all of the youths except one.”

Hatch looked at him. “Which one?”

“There was a young Fijian woman who was the ship’s cook.”

“How many teens did you capture?” Hatch asked.

“Twelve.”

“Twelve,” Hatch repeated. “I guess they didn’t all make it off of Hades, then.”

At that moment two burly, heavily armed Filipino soldiers walked down the plank, escorting Welch between them. Hatch looked up at him with a grim smile. “There he is.”

“The one you call Welch,” Shool said.

“*Traitor* Welch,” Hatch said.

The soldiers dragged their prisoner in front of Hatch.

“So the prodigal returns,” Hatch said.

“Not by choice,” Welch said.

“I expect not. What traitor wants to be held accountable for his cowardice?”

“One man’s traitor is another man’s hero.”

“Don’t fool yourself, Welch. You’re no one’s hero.” He looked him over. “You’ve looked better. You didn’t really think you could escape, did you?”

“I didn’t think we could decimate your army either, but we did, didn’t we?”

Hatch sneered. “Michael Vey did. And, frankly, it was worth the loss just to be through with him.” Hatch turned to EGG Amon. “Take your former colleague and lock him up in Cell 25.”

Welch looked at Hatch and said, “You’re not going to win.”

Hatch smiled. “I already have, David.” He turned to Amon. “Take the traitor away.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“What would you like done with the others?” Shool asked.

“The Glows,” Hatch said. “Put them under full guard, and EGG Bowen will lead you to the prison. We’ll hold them until they stand trial.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Shool again issued an order to his men, then turned back to Hatch. “Should we deactivate the machines you gave us?”

“The RESATs? No! Never turn off those machines!”

The captain was taken back the intensity of Hatch’s reaction. “As you wish, Admiral.”

“You don’t understand,” Hatch said. “If you turn off the RESATs, you’ll have a much bigger problem than you could ever imagine.”

Shool looked unimpressed. “They’re just teens, Admiral.”

“No, Captain. They’re not ‘just’ anything. You have no idea what you’re holding in your brig. Had you attempted to take those ‘teens’ without the machines I provided you, they would have taken you *and* your ships.”

The captain looked at Hatch cynically. “You hold us in contempt, sir. My soldiers are decorated, well-trained fighting men of the highest caliber.”

“I meant no disrespect, Captain. I’m sure your men are the elite of your navy. You just don’t know what you don’t know. These youths are not ordinary humans. They are a science experiment gone awry. In the last week those youths have killed more than four thousand of my men and wiped out the whole of my navy.”

Shool looked at him with amazement. “I had no idea, Admiral. Why was I not informed of this danger?”

“If you have to walk a tightrope without a net, it’s better not to know how high up you are, if you know what I mean. What about the *Joule’s* crew, COB Quinn and his men?”

“They’re being held in the brig as well. Would you like me to release them?”

“You’ll release them to ZC Denkers,” Hatch said. He signaled for the Zone Captain. “Denkers, Captain Shool will be releasing the COB and his men into your custody. Take them to the bowl and have the crew prepare them for dinner.”

“Yes, sir,” Denkers said.

From Hatch’s order the captain assumed the Elgen COB and his men would be guests at the dinner, not be the meal.

Hatch turned back to the captain. “Please, come inside and avail yourself of my hospitality. We have an officers’ club that has no parallel in this part of the world—companionship and the finest European food and drink, including some of your local favorites—coconut wine, Tondenia premium rum, and San Miguel for your men—as well as a few imported specialties. Have you ever tasted Karuizawa, Captain?”

The captain almost laughed. “The Japanese whiskey? No, sir. That’s a bit above my pay grade.”

“At forty-thousand dollars a bottle, I would think so,” Hatch said. “Or the officers of the Philippine Navy would be the envy of the world. I have a lovely forty-eight-year-old bottle in my office that you and I will open tonight to celebrate your success. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to.”

“Of course. Thank you, Admiral, for your kindness. I will look forward to seeing you tonight.”

Hatch started to walk away, then suddenly stopped and turned back. “Captain, have you ever seen how a Starxource plant operates?”

“No, sir. It is my understanding that the operation is top secret.”

“Yes. But you, of course, have top secret clearance. Tonight you will get a rare view of what few have ever seen. Trust me, you’ll never forget it.” With that Hatch turned and walked away.

PART FOURTEEN



The Dinner Jacket

Welch had never been more than a few feet inside Cell 25, but he knew enough about it to fear it. He never imagined he would someday occupy it. The infamous cell was designed to bring its occupant the maximum amount of stress, fear, and pain. Hatch sometimes used Tara to create an added dimension of terror, but even without her contributions it was horrible. He wondered how long he would be able to endure it.

* * *

While Welch was locked away by Amon and three guards, the Electroclan was taken to the dungeon with the RESATs strapped to their chests and their hands chained behind their backs.

In spite of Hatch's orders to keep the youths separated, there weren't enough cells to give everyone his or her own, so McKenna and Cassy were kept in the same cell, as were Zeus and Torstyn. Once in the cells, their chains were removed but the RESATs were only turned down, not enough for them to use their powers, but enough to allow some relief from the overwhelming pain that made it difficult to

breath and kept their hearts pounding at more than a hundred and fifty beats a minute.

Cassy was the only one who had never been inside a Starxource plant. About ten minutes after being locked in the cell, she said, "At least there's food." On a side table extending from the wall was Rabisk. Cassy picked up a biscuit.

"I wouldn't eat that," McKenna said.

"What is it? And what are these little fibers covering it?"

"It's Rabisk."

"What's Rabisk?"

"It's what they feed the rats. It's made of ground-up rats. Those fibers are rat hair."

Cassy dropped the biscuit, almost throwing up. After a moment she asked, "Do you think they're going to feed us to the rats?"

"Don't think about that," McKenna said.

"Where do you think Jack and Ostin are?"

McKenna spun around. "Shhh! They're listening."

Cassy looked around the room, then said, softly, "Sorry. This is new to me."

McKenna walked over to Cassy and put her mouth up to her ear. "They're probably making a plan to save us."

McKenna had barely finished whispering when from each corner of the room came an audio blast as loud as the horn of a diesel truck, loud enough to almost knock them over. It was followed by a voice from the overhead speakers. "Prisoners of Cell 17. No talking is allowed. Stay away from each other or you will be punished."

McKenna stepped back. "Like we're not already being punished?"

The horn blasted again, followed by a sharp pulse in the RESAT, dropping both girls to their knees.

"Enough already!" Cassy shouted. "We get it!"

* * *

Out of all of the surviving Electroclan, Taylor was the least affected by the capture. She had already hit her emotional bottom, and she no longer cared what happened to her. She had lost Michael and with

him all hope in their cause. She didn't know if her parents or brothers were still alive, and if they were, she assumed that Hatch would find them all and kill them. It wasn't a question of *if*, only *when*. No matter what Hatch did to her, she was already broken. Not even the rat bowl held any terror, as there was simply no more pain she could add to what she already felt. As she lay back on the cell's hard mattress, she heard someone call her.

"Taylor."

She looked over. Michael was standing near the door. Or, at least, what seemed like a projection of Michael, since the image quivered and shimmered in places.

"You're not really here . . . ," she said, rubbing her eyes. "I know you're not really here." She buried her face in her hands.

"It's not over, Taylor. Don't lose hope."

Taylor looked up, expecting the image to be gone. Instead Michael was just staring at her.

"Why are you tormenting me like this?" she screamed.

The vision faded.

Taylor rubbed her eyes again as she lay back on the mattress. "I really am going crazy."

* * *

The youths had been locked up for about seven hours when an alarm went off in the cells, followed by a voice coming from the ceiling speakers.

"Enemies of Hatch Islands. Prepare for transport. Elgen guards will be at your rooms shortly. Stay away from the doors or you will be punished." The message was followed by a sharp increase in the RESATs' amp, dropping all of the youths to their knees. Within a few minutes, two guards appeared at each cell, walking them to an electric cart and driving them to a separate part of the building, the curved observatory deck above the bowl. It was the same room where Prime Minister Saluni had been humiliated and dragged away as the rest of the Tuvaluan government learned of Hatch's plans to take their country. The bowl was closed off by a metal screen, leaving the room

lit by stark, overhead blue and white LED lighting. There were several long tables set with china, crystal, and silverware in preparation for the evening's feast in honor of Captain Shool.

Cassy, who had been separated from McKenna, was the last to arrive. Everyone else was already kneeling on the floor, their hands cuffed behind their backs and chained to a ring on the floor.

Cassy was brought over to the last vacant spot, a space between Quentin and Nichelle, and locked down. After the guard stepped away, she looked over at the set tables, then asked Nichelle, "Hatch is having us for dinner?"

"Be careful how you ask that," Nichelle said.

"Hatch has lost his mind," Quentin said. "Word was he was planning to eat Michael when he caught him."

"He's crazy," Cassy said.

"Yeah. He is," Nichelle replied.

"How did you guys live with him all those years?" Cassy asked.

"When you're raised in an asylum, crazy is normal," Quentin replied.

Cassy frowned as she looked around the room. It seemed nicer than the other parts of the plant she had been exposed to. It was less industrial. There was padded carpet. The walls were paneled in stained wood, and bronze light fixtures provided soft illumination. "Where are we?"

"We're next to the bowl," Quentin said.

"The *bowl*," Cassy repeated. She had only heard of the bowl. Still, the very mention of it made her shudder.

"Are they going to feed us to the rats now?"

"No. They don't feed from here," Quentin said. "This is where you watch the rats feed."

A light alarm beeped and the massive wall divide began to move. As the two parts separated, the light from the bowl flooded the room in brilliant, oscillating orange hues. Within less than a minute the walls had completely parted, exposing a broad panoramic view of the rat bowl. The rats glowed crimson and orange. They were being moved by the continual sweep.

Cassy looked at the scene with awe. "Oh . . ."

“That’s the bowl,” Quentin said to her. “That’s where the rats produce electricity. You should see it when they’re about to feed.”

“It’s hideous,” Nichelle said.

Cassy just stared. “It’s strangely beautiful.”

“Only from this side of the glass,” Quentin said.

Suddenly a voice filled the room. “My Glows, my Glows.” Everyone except Cassy recognized the voice coming from a speaker near the center of the room. It was Dr. Hatch. “Welcome back to Elgenland.”

“You’re psychotic!” Torstyn shouted.

“Considering your present circumstance, Torstyn, you should be more careful with your tongue, unless you’d like to lose it. But I digress. You of the Electroclan cult caused quite a mess of things the last time you were here. You murdered thousands of my men. I’m sure you weren’t planning to be back so soon. But make no mistake, you will be spending the rest of your lives here. How *long* the rest of your lives are, and the quality of those lives, depends solely on how well you cooperate with my instructions.

“Which leads to why I had you brought to the bowl. The reason is simple. Motivation. At the end of the week, one of you, along with former EGG Welch, will be fed to the rats. I have not yet selected which one of you it will be. You’re all so special that it’s going to be difficult choosing just one of you, but if any of you wish to help sway me with your defiance, it will certainly be appreciated.”

The youths glanced back and forth at one another. Suddenly an alarm sounded from inside the glass. A chute, almost twelve feet wide, slowly began protruding from the wall. It continued to extend to more than thirty feet, then abruptly stopped. Slowly it began to lower until it was just six feet above the bowl’s floor. Immediately the rats swarmed beneath it, the brilliance of their coats growing into bright orange and yellow until they glowed like molten lava.

“They’re about to feed,” Quentin said softly.

Hatch continued. “I would like to use this demonstration to remind you all what’s at stake. For those who have witnessed this before, forgive the redundancy, but when it comes to teaching, a refresher never hurts. Personally, I never tire of watching them feed. Please, your attention to the bowl.”

An amber light began flashing as a door at the mouth of the chute began to open.

“What do you see, Ian?” Quentin asked, forgetting that the RESATs that took away their powers had taken away Ian’s sight.

“I don’t see anything,” Ian said. “I’m blind.”

“Sorry, man,” Quentin said. “I forgot.”

Something slowly emerged from the door. It took a moment for Cassy to understand what she was seeing. “They’re feet,” Cassy said. “Human feet.”

“Indeed, young lady,” Hatch said. “When your compadre, Vey, decided to go all supernova on us, his flash blinded most of my guards. Fortunately, I was wearing my protective glasses.”

“Shame,” Torstyn said.

“A second mark on Torstyn,” Hatch said. “Congratulations, Torstyn. You are now well in the lead in the race to the rat bowl.”

“I was already scheduled for your bowl, you nutcase.”

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy watching those little beasts rip the flesh from your bones, Torstyn. But as I was saying. Nearly all of my personal guards were blinded by the flash. Unfortunately. A blind Elgen guard is about as useful as an armless boxer. Of course, being loyal Elgen, they apologized for their state and promised that they would do whatever they could for our cause. I assured them that, in spite of their situation, they could still provide some benefit. They were genuinely excited about that prospect. You are about to see a few of those men give their all.”

The body began to move out of the door until it was entirely on the chute. The man was alive, bound at the ankles and knees, with his arms tied against his waist and chest.

“You’ve got to admit this is pretty cool,” Hatch said. “Look at those rats scurrying to feed. Of course there’s really no way that we could ever know what their favorite food is, but from the increase in their excitement and subsequent electrical output, it’s pretty clear that they prefer fresh meat over Rabisk. They certainly do look excited, don’t they? The rats, that is. The human doesn’t look like he’s having as much fun.”

“You’re sick!” Abigail shouted.

“Be quiet,” McKenna said to her.

“We hear from the gentle Abigail. Torstyn, you have some competition. But with your fiery temper, you’re up to the challenge.”

Torstyn clenched his jaw but said nothing.

As the conveyor lowered, the rats gathered more closely together in anticipation, until they formed a large hill of rat, with those on the top jumping for the belt.

As the man slid down the chute, he continued to struggle against the straps that held him. Then, as his feet extended over the edge of the chute, the first of the rats, in a wild frenzy, flew at him. Within seconds they were swarming around him as he screamed in pain.

“You’re lucky you get to see this in person,” Hatch said. “I could put it on YouTube and get a billion views.”

Within two minutes the man’s rib cage was exposed as the rats ate his internal organs.

“It’s the simple pleasures,” Hatch said.

Abigail began shaking. McKenna leaned into her. “Don’t say anything.”

“You’ll notice an improvement to the process. Since the rats can’t digest fabric, what’s left of the clothes wreaks havoc on the Rabisk machines. So we tried something new. We created what we refer to as ‘the dinner jacket.’ Not what most exclusive diners are looking for, this jacket is actually edible. It’s made of dried vegetable and fruit textile. It’s like wearing apricot leather. It’s nothing you’re going to want to serve to guests, but the rats like it.

“They say clothes make the man, and you are what you eat. I think we just proved both statements correct. But I digress. Our dinner guests are waiting. Contestant number two. You might recognize this one.”

As the conveyor started again, the first man’s bones dropped into the bowl and were quickly covered by the teeming swarm. The second man was screaming loudly enough that they could hear him even above the frenzied squeal of the rats. Cassy recognized the man as one of the crewmen from the *Joule*—the one who had tried to kiss her. She turned away.

“No fair looking away,” Hatch said. “Turn back, or I’ll slow down the chute so he can suffer more.”

Cassy forced herself to watch. Even before the man was completely consumed, the third man began rolling down the chute, another crewman from the *Joule*.

“Now notice what he’s wearing,” Hatch said. He suddenly laughed. “I sound like I’m an announcer at the Miss Ratworld fashion show: our third lovely contestant is wearing an inedible creation by Christian Dior.” He laughed again. “I was saying, the third guard was a little more defiant than I preferred, so he didn’t get the dinner jacket. He got the leather corset. The significance? The corset protects his vitals. So that means the rats will have to burrow through his body to get to the really juicy stuff. It also means that he will be fully alive and feeling all of it. Some of these unlucky corset wearers not only get to see their own bones; they can see rats burrowing under their skin.

Abigail gagged.

“I know, it sounds unpleasant. It is, of course. Far more so than you could imagine. But I point out his attire because the one of you whom I choose to feed to the rats will be wearing the same thing—leather armor. I think with all this buildup and anticipation, it would be a shame to have it over so quickly.”

“Just take me!” Quentin shouted. “You deranged madman.”

“Noble Quentin,” Hatch said. “Cool your tongue before I cut it off like I did to the other inhabitant of the monkey cages, which is exactly where I’m returning you. I hope you’re not too disappointed.”

Quentin gritted his teeth. “I’m good. I like monkeys.”

“Ah, I miss that. That’s one of the things I always liked about you, Q. Your unabashed sense of humor. Joking in the face of terror. What a remarkable gift. You would have made a grand king, maybe even my successor if you hadn’t gotten so . . . stupid.”

“I could never fill your shoes, Hatch,” Quentin said. “Actually, I couldn’t fit my feet into them, they’re so small. What do they say, small shoes, small . . . brain.”

Tara laughed.

“That’s one for you, Tara. And you, Quentin, you jest with the boldness of a man whose fate is already decided. But just because

your fate is sealed, don't believe that I can't make it worse. Trust me, I can always make it worse. There are other things I can cut off besides just your tongue. And, if not to you, perhaps I could arrange something for your girlfriend, Tara."

Tara blanched.

"I'm sorry, sir," Quentin said.

"I thought that might get to you. And for the record, Frank, the young man formerly known as Zeus, isn't in the running for the bowl either. His destiny is with something as unspectacular as the sprinkler system in the courtyard. He will be tied to a chair. Then, as each sprinkler makes its rounds—you know the sound, *cha, cha, cha, cha*—each time that water hits him, it will burn like acid. It will likely take hours to finish him off. Imagine that, burning him alive with water. What a fascinating twist. We're all very excited about this. We plan to record it for posterity.

"In fact, the guards talked me into having him installed with a heart monitor so we can call the exact time of death. They're doing that because they've already started putting down bets on how long he'll survive." Hatch's voice lowered. "I give you forty-five minutes."

Tessa's eyes filled with tears as she looked at Zeus. Zeus just looked down, defeated.

The alarm began to beep again. With the meat devoured, the rats' brilliance had already started to fade. The sliding doors began to close on the bowl.

"Show is over," Hatch said. "Got to save some for later. I hope you enjoyed it. More important, I hope it inspired you. You will now be taken back to your rooms. Get some rest, if you can. I will be meeting with you in the morning. And I have a very big surprise for you. All of you. Sleep well, Glows." The speaker clicked, and the room went silent.

The guards unhooked the youths, then took them all back to their cells.

"What do you think his surprise is?" Tessa asked Quentin.

"No idea," Quentin said. "But I can wait to find out."



Number Seventeen

Just an hour after sunrise, the Electroclan was brought back to the same room above the bowl. It was the one room designed so that all of them could be chained down together. After the guards had again chained them to the floor, the lights were turned off. The room was lit only by the dim combined glow of the youths.

It was a full hour later when a door opened and a voice spoke from the darkness. "I'll never get tired of seeing that." Dr. Hatch stepped forward, followed by two guards, Bryan, Kylee, and a young woman none of them had ever seen before. "You really are remarkable creatures," Hatch said. "Granted, trying to control you is like herding cats, but as physical specimens, you are truly remarkable."

"Hey, Q-tip," Bryan said to Quentin.

"Hey, moron," Quentin said. "Still wetting the bed?"

Bryan blushed. He turned to Hatch. "Can I hit him?"

"No," Hatch said.

"You always were such a lapdog," Quentin said.

"All right, go ahead," Hatch said.

Bryan walked up to Quentin and slugged him in the stomach. Quentin's hands were tied behind his back, so he was unable to completely double over. When he could speak, he said, "What a coward. You wait to hit me when my hands are tied?"

"What did you call me?" Bryan asked.

Quentin looked up at him. "I don't know. I called you so many things. Did you mean 'lapdog,' 'moron,' or 'coward'?"

Bryan slugged him again. "What did you call me?"

"What, you want me to come up with something else?"

"Stop it," Hatch said. "Get back over here."

Bryan slapped the top of Quentin's head, then walked back.

"Chicken," Quentin said.

"I told you I had a surprise for you this morning. I think this one is really going to blow your minds."

"Who's the girl?" Zeus asked.

"You always were one to jump the gun, Frank. This young lady is the surprise I promised you. Come up here, darling. Let's give these Glows a look at perfection."

The young woman stepped forward. She looked to be the same age as them, only there was something older about her. She was tall and shapely and had long black hair that fell to the middle of her back, with a magenta streak running down the middle. Her face was narrow and pretty, with pale skin and radiant blue eyes. She wore tight designer jeans and knee-high leather boots. She carried herself with a confidence that could be construed as arrogance or cruelty. It was obvious that she looked down on the other Glows as inferior.

"It's been written that the first will be last and the last will be first," Hatch said. "You knew there were originally seventeen electric children. You've met sixteen of them. Let me introduce you to number seventeen. Zara."

The youths all looked at her, wondering where she had come from.

"Did you know about her?" Tara asked Quentin. Quentin shook his head.

"I remember her," Nichelle said.

"No, he must have just found her."

“No, I didn’t just find her,” Hatch said. “In fact, the opposite was true. I knew her before any of you, except Nichelle. Zara was the second child we found. Nichelle is right. Even though you don’t remember, most of you have met her. Quentin, you were five years old when the two of you played together. But that didn’t last. Zara was so unique, I decided to keep her to myself. No one but me knew about her. A good card player never shows his hand.”

He turned back. “Say hi to your siblings, Zara.”

“Yeah,” she said, staring at them as if it were the last thing she wanted to do.

“There you go,” Hatch said. “I know what you’re all thinking. What can she do? What’s her power? This is why I kept her apart. She can do it all. While Nichelle can diminish your power, Zara can replicate it.”

“Vey could do that,” Zeus said.

“There is no Vey,” Hatch shouted. “Vey is dead. While Zara, as you can see, is very much alive. And, like those of you who once were with me, she has been trained and sharpened like a deadly tool.”

“You’re a tool,” Torstyn said.

“Another mark on Torstyn’s run for the bowl,” Hatch said. “You’re not making this hard for me.”

“Looking at you is hard for me,” Torstyn said.

“Well, don’t worry. You won’t have to for much longer.” He turned to Zara. “As I was saying, Zara can replicate your powers. But the best part is, anything you can do she can do even better. So, this morning we’re going to take some inventory. Zara, if you will . . .”

Zara began to rise off the ground.

“Great,” Tessa said. “She can fly.”

“She’s not flying, per se,” Ian said. “It’s magnetic repulsion. It’s like the opposite of Kylee.”

Zara floated to the end of the line, where McKenna was chained. She held out her palm in front of McKenna’s face.

“Zara,” Hatch said. “This first Glow is McKenna.”

As Zara looked at her, Zara’s hand turned to fire. Then she turned it into an intense flame so hot that even McKenna tried to push away from it.

“That’s fun,” Zara said. “Light and heat. That could be very useful.”

“That is correct,” Hatch said. “And next to her is a Glow I’ve wanted to meet for a very, very long time. No one told me you were so attractive, Cassy. What do you young people say, ‘hot’?”

“I’m going to throw up,” Cassy said.

“So where have you been hiding, Cassy?”

“I’ve never wanted to meet you,” Cassy said. “And where I’ve been is none of your business.”

“Every aspect of your life is most assuredly *my* business,” Hatch replied. “And you will tell me where you’ve been. You should know by now that I *always* find out what I want to know.”

Zara put her hand over Cassy’s head. “Wow. She’s a powerful one. She could kill everyone in this room with a thought. Everyone but me, of course. I’m definitely going to hang on to this one.”

“Very good,” Hatch said. “You do that. Going down the line, this next one is Abigail.”

“Abigail.” Zara held out her hand. “Boring. Taking away others’ pain but not your own. What a waste of electricity. Moving on.”

Abigail turned away from her.

“Next,” Hatch said with disgust, “is Frank, the Glow once called Zeus.”

Zara held her hand above Zeus’s head for a moment. Then she turned and fired a lightning bolt so intense that it split apart the lectern at the front of the room. “Sorry, Admiral-General. I don’t always know my own power.”

“It’s not your power,” Zeus said. “It’s mine.”

“What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine is mine,” Zara said. “Sucks to be you, little man.”

“When I get out of here . . .”

“The only way you’re getting out of here,” Hatch said, “is when your heart stops beating. Move on. The girl next to him is Tesla.”

“Tessa,” she said.

“Tessa, Tesla,” Hatch said. “What’s in a name? Doesn’t matter anymore. You can call yourself Bob for all I care.”

“Why would I call myself Bob?”

“This one’s power feels a little weird,” Zara said. “So this one amplifies others’ powers. In fact . . .” Zara stepped back a few paces. “I can pick up different powers at the same time. She could definitely come in handy.”

“So glad I’m useful,” Tessa said.

“You should be,” Zara replied. “That means you might live longer.”

“Next is Ian.”

Zara stepped up to him and smiled. “Oh, that is cool. I can see . . . everything. Do you know how many rats you have around here?”

“We breed rats,” Hatch said.

“I’m not referring to the electric ones,” Zara said. “This power is not only useful. It could be a lot of fun. Oh, look at the guards . . .”

“Next up needs no introduction. Torstyn.”

Zara nodded. “So that’s what microwaves feel like.” She pointed her hand across the room at a picture of Hatch, and the frame began sparking. “That’s pretty dangerous. I can see why you keep this one locked up.”

“Dangerous but stupid. Next to him is Nichelle.”

Zara closed her eyes as her hand fluttered around Nichelle’s head. “So that’s what you do. You’re basically a black hole.”

“I’d love to shove something up your hole,” Nichelle said.

Zara laughed. “Crass little emo. I could use her power against any of these losers and kill them with it.”

“Next is Tara.”

“Tara,” Zara said. “I’ve heard of you.” Zara suddenly changed her appearance to look exactly like Tara. She then changed to look like Dr. Hatch, Justin Bieber, and then Michael Vey.

“Stop that!” Taylor shouted.

Zara turned back into herself, then stepped past Tara to Taylor. “So you’re the other half of the twins. You don’t like that, mind-scrambler? You and Vey were tight?” As she moved closer to Taylor, Zara began to grin. “Oh my, oh my, oh my. That is going to be so useful.”

“What’s going to be useful?” Hatch asked.

Zara turned back. “The prettier twin can read minds.”

Hatch looked at Taylor in amazement. ““Oh my’ indeed. That explains a lot. Will the revelations ever cease?” Hatch said, “Take her power. Now.”

“Yes, sir.” She turned back and held her hand a few inches above Taylor’s head. “Done.”

“We’re going to find out some things right now. We’ll start back here with Cassy. I thought she was dead. Let’s find out where she’s been hiding. Or who’s been hiding her and where.”

“I’ll never tell you,” Cassy shouted.

Zara walked over and held her palm over Cassy’s head. “She’s been in a secret compound in France.”

“Stop it!” Cassy shouted.

“She’s very afraid. She doesn’t want you to know that she’s been living with the one they call the voice.”

“Has she, now?” Hatch said. A broad smile crossed Hatch’s face. He turned to the two guards next to him. “Bring her to the interrogation room. We’re going to have a little discussion.”

“Stop it!” Cassy shouted. “Leave me alone.”

“You’re asking me to walk away from a diamond mine,” Hatch said. “Come with me, Zara. Bryan and Kylee, you’re dismissed.”

Hatch and Zara left the room.

“C’mon,” one of the guards said to Cassy.

“No!” Cassy screamed.

“Leave her alone!” Abigail shouted.

“You’re coming one way or another,” the guard said.

“I’m not going.”

“Not your decision,” the guard said. The two guards unchained Cassy, then lifted her, carrying her down the hall to a small, mirror-walled office where Hatch and Zara were sitting. They dropped Cassy in a sobbing heap onto the floor.

“Shut the door,” Hatch said. “Then take the others back to their cells.” He pointed at one of the guards. “You stay.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hatch sat back in his chair. “You can read her from here?” he asked Zara.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then we’ll start.” He leaned toward Cassy. “All right, hot little Cassy. You’re being recorded, so everything you say will be captured. And I think you have a lot to say. I know I have a lot of questions.”

“I won’t tell you anything,” Cassy said. “You can’t make me talk.”

“You don’t have to talk,” Hatch said. “You just need to think. So let’s begin with a softball question. Tell me, Cassy, who is the voice?”

Cassy struggled with her restraints. “You can’t make me tell you.”

Zara turned to Hatch and nodded. “Got it.”

“I’m afraid you already did, sweetheart. Who is it, Zara?”

“Some man named Dr. Coonradt.”

Hatch almost gasped. “Coonradt? I didn’t see that coming. Well, well . . . Dr. Coonradt is supposed to be dead. How clever of him. The doctor was a very intelligent man, but I don’t see him starting a revolution. Where is Coonradt holed up?”

Zara turned back to Cassy. “France.”

“It’s hard to believe I was so close to him all along. Tell me about the compound. Where is it exactly?”

“Please let me go.”

“I will once I’ve milked you for all you know. Now, where is this compound?”

Zara shook her head. “She’s trying to think of different things.”

“Just wait for her to slip. There’s no better way to get someone to think of something than to tell them not to think of it. Tell her not to think of a pink flying monkey, and what have you got?”

“She just thought of a pink flying monkey,” Zara said.

“Exactly. Now, pretty little Cassy, tell me exactly where we’ll find the resistance’s compound.”

Cassy closed her eyes and bowed her head.

“She’s reciting Bible verses,” Zara said.

“Interesting,” Hatch said. “I like Bible verses. Do you like the Psalms? How about this one? ‘They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.’”

“Stop it!” Cassy shouted.

“I can see it all,” Zara said. “I need something to draw with.”

“Get her a pad!” Hatch shouted to one of the guards.

The guard found a pad in the desk and carried it over to her. Zara immediately began drawing. “There’s just one outer wall. The building’s a mansion. It’s three stories high. I can draw it.”

“How is it protected?”

Zara hesitated. “Mostly by her. There are fourteen guards. They’re well trained, fairly well armed, automatic weapons, UZIs, nothing we can’t take out.”

“Keep drawing,” Hatch said. After fifteen minutes she showed him a picture of the European compound.

“Is Coonradt the head of the resistance?”

Cassy shouted out in pain. “Stop it!”

“No,” Zara said. “He’s second in charge. There’s someone above him.” She thought a moment, then said. “It’s Vey. Not Michael Vey.”

“Sharon Vey?” Hatch said, sounding skeptical. “She’s the heart of all this?”

Zara shook her head. “No. Not Michael’s mother. His father.”



Carl Vey

Hatch slammed his fist down on the table with delight. “Jackpot! This is too much. You’re telling me that Carl Vey is *also* alive?! And I thought Coonradt being alive was a mind-blow. That’s unbelievable news. Well played, Vey. Well played. From the very beginning he’s been orchestrating the rebellion from his grave!”

Cassy closed her eyes as tears streamed down her cheeks. She had just betrayed the one secret that had kept the resistance alive.

“Where is he?” Hatch asked. “Where’s Vey?”

Zara turned back. “She doesn’t know. It’s their prime secret.”

“Ask her who does know.”

Zara struggled briefly with Cassy’s thoughts, then said, “Dr. Coonradt. He’s the only one who knows.”

“Then we’ll start with him. So, Cassy, where’s the rest of the resistance based? It can’t all be in France because we found one of their bases in Mexico and burned it down.”

“Stop it!” Cassy shouted.

“There’s a ranch,” Zara said.

“I know. We attacked it. There’s nothing left.”

“There’s another. The first ranch was called Time . . .”

“Timepiece Ranch,” Hatch said.

“Yes. The second one, where the rest of the resistance is right now, is called Christmas Ranch.”

“Clever. Where is that located?”

Zara closed her eyes for a moment, then said, “It’s on the east side of Zion National Park in southern Utah.”

“Utah,” Hatch said. “Who would ever think to look in Utah?” He smiled. “Now, Cassy. Tell us everything you know about Christmas Ranch.”

“I don’t know anything about it,” Cassy said out loud. “I’ve never been there.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Zara said.

“Ask her who knows.”

Zara got up and knelt in front of Cassy, gently stroking her fingers through the sobbing girl’s hair. Then Zara slowly looked up. “Pretty much every one of the Glows but her.”

* * *

When Hatch had finished interrogating Cassy, he smiled. “Beautiful. Just beautiful. Thank you, Cassy. You told us everything we need to know to end this nonsense for good. I’m so glad your friends were thoughtful enough to send you.”

“I hate you!” Cassy screamed.

Hatch looked at her stoically. “Of course you hate me. You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t. But I don’t hate you. You’re just a product of your upbringing. But I made you. You could say I’m your biological father. Or your god.”

“You’re not a god. You’re the devil.”

Hatch shrugged. “One man’s devil is another man’s god.” He leaned forward. “You might want to be more careful about how you judge others, since you just betrayed everyone you have ever loved. After we arrest Dr. Coonradt, I’ll be sure to let him know that it was you who led us to him.”

“You’re sick,” Cassy sobbed.

Hatch laughed. "Guards, take her back to her cell. And see to it that she doesn't try to hurt herself. I'd like to keep her around for a while."

Hatch stood. "I've got to go." He turned to the guard. "Start bringing the Glows in one by one. Don't bother with my Glows, just the ones who came here from the resistance. Start with Ian and Frank. Ian because he's seen the most and Frank because he's a detail man. I want Peters and Heinz up here interrogating them with Zara. I want to know everything about this Christmas Ranch by twenty-one-hundred hours. I want a complete map, schedule, everything. I'll be back in ninety minutes."

"Where are you going?" Zara asked.

"I've got a date with a bottle of Karuizawa."

* * *

When Cassy got back to her cell, she was sobbing hysterically. McKenna put her arm around her. "It's okay, honey."

"No, it's not. Nothing's okay. I've given away everything. *Everything*. I didn't know they could do that. I never should have come. I've ruined everything."

PART FIFTEEN



Welcome Aboard

Hatch had Captain Shool escorted up to his office on the second floor.

“How is business?” Hatch asked the captain.

Captain Shool smiled. “Business? Do you call *war* business?”

“War is big business,” Hatch said. He brought the bottle of Karuizawa out of his liquor cabinet and held it up for the captain to see. “Imagine, this liquid costs more per ounce than gold.” He opened the bottle and poured liquid into two shot glasses.

“Admiral-General . . .”

Hatch held up his hand to stop him from talking. “Please. Enjoy this moment. Such pleasures are far too rare.”

Both men lifted their glasses and drank.

“Magnificent,” Hatch said. “Worth every penny.”

“Indescribable,” Captain Shool said.

“Then let me pour you another.” Hatch refilled the captain’s glass, then his own. After they had drunk the second glass, Hatch’s face had a red glow. “Did you know that the distillery where this nectar was produced was on the slope of an active volcano?”

“No, Admiral.”

“Unfortunately, it is no more. The distillery was closed more than a decade ago, which makes this magnificent liquid all the more valuable. Life is like that. The most precious things are fleeting. Do you agree, Captain?”

“Yes, I agree.”

Hatch again lifted the bottle to top off the captain’s glass.

“Thank you, Admiral, but I think I’ve had enough.”

Hatch smiled and poured the glass anyway. “Can you have enough heaven?” He laughed. “I think not.” He filled his own glass again. “So, as I asked before, how is business?”

“It is well, mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“You know. I’m a soldier, not a politician. The politics are as capricious as the sea.”

“I understand,” Hatch said. “I have a solution for that. I would like to make you a proposition.”

“A proposition?”

“Yes, Captain. I have recently lost my best ship captains.”

“How could you lose them all, sir?”

“Very unexpectedly,” Hatch said, lifting his glass. “What do you know of these criminals you brought me?”

“I was not told much, except that they were terrorists.”

“Terrorists,” Hatch said. “Indeed. They were involved in a suicide bombing that destroyed most of my army.” He put the top back on the bottle of Karuizawa. “My point in telling you this, Captain, is that I am looking to hire.” Hatch took a slow sip as he studied the captain’s face. “I don’t know what you know about the Elgen Corporation, but we are poised to become not only the largest and most profitable corporation in the world, but also the most powerful. If we were a country, our GNP would make us the twelfth most profitable in the world, somewhere between Australia and Mexico.”

“That is remarkable, Admiral.”

“Yes, it is. I am, by trade, a scientist as well as a businessman. Which means I don’t assume anything. I hypothesize, then prove. I research. And I’ve researched your career, Captain. You are from

Quezon City, the most populous city in the Philippines. Your father was a bureaucrat, your mother, who is Vietnamese by birth, was a professor of international law. You have never been married; you have been quoted as saying that you are married to the navy.”

Captain Shool smiled. “That is all true, Admiral.”

“You were also the captain behind one of the most controversial operations in all of Philippine history, as you put down the president’s rival with a significant number of civilian casualties.”

Captain Shool downed the rest of his glass. “I was following orders.”

“Exactly,” Hatch said. “Exactly. Which makes you precisely what I am looking for. I’m impressed with what you have accomplished. I’m impressed with your obedience in following unpopular orders. I’m impressed by your attention to detail and precision, and how successfully you carried out this mission. As such, I would like to offer you the position as head of the Elgen Navy.”

The captain looked stunned. “Sir . . .”

“Before you answer, consider this. You will have a life of power, privilege, and, most important, purpose. I will quadruple your current salary and give you a million-dollar signing bonus if you agree right now. That is in American dollars, or the equivalent of a million dollars in any currency you wish. But my proposal is only good if you accept it now, before you leave this room.”

Captain Shool was quiet for a moment, then said, “I cannot abandon my crew here. I would need to sail back and inform my superiors.”

Hatch smiled. “See, exactly why you are perfect for the job. Of course, Captain. I would expect that. But before you go, I do have a favor to ask, one that may benefit your crew.”

“What is that, sir?”

“The coup that took place in our nation is not completely put down. The rebels have taken refuge inside our national gold depository just sixty kilometers from here. Unfortunately for us, I built the depository to withstand any land assault.”

“Of course you would,” the captain said.

“Being indestructible is, of course, only of value if you have control of the building. But, currently, I do not. I could use a battleship right

now to . . . *correct* the situation.”

“I understand, Admiral. But to engage in battle I would have to have the permission of my superiors.”

Hatch took the top back off the bottle of whiskey, then said, “Unless, of course, it was only a training exercise. It’s not often you get the opportunity to engage in a real-life shelling of infrastructure. Far too costly.”

Captain Shool thought for a moment, then said, “It could be done.”

“Excellent,” Hatch said. He poured another two glasses of Karuizawa and handed the first to the captain. “If you will accept my offer, please celebrate with me with a toast.”

“I will,” Captain Shool said, and took the new glass.

“To my new chief admiral of naval operations. Welcome aboard, Elgen.”



Operation Mute

Since Cassy had never been to Christmas Ranch, she couldn't reveal much about it. Zara and Hatch's war ministers grilled Ian, Taylor, Zeus, Nichelle, Abigail, and McKenna for several hours on the specifics of the ranch headquarters. The Elgen learned how the property was laid out, the level of security, where their weapons were kept, their routines, and, most important, where they would find Sharon Vey. By the time they finished their interrogation, they knew everything they needed to destroy the ranch once and for all.

* * *

After concluding his meeting with Captain Shool, Hatch called a council of the EGG—the four who were in Tuvalu and the rest by video around the world.

“Gentlemen,” Hatch said. “The resistance has made a fatal error and handed us the rope we need to hang them. Yes, we are weakened, but, fortunately, we still have guards abroad and, as luck would have it, not far from where we require them.” He walked to an electric screen, and a map of the world appeared. “The last of the resistance

resides in two places.” He pointed to the map with a laser pointer. “Their main headquarters and hiding place of the voice is here, a secret compound in the northeastern mountains of France. The second is a ranch in southern Utah, where the resistance council and Sharon Vey are hiding. That is where they went after we destroyed Timepiece Ranch.”

“Sir,” EGG Amon said. “I thought we had destroyed the resistance in Mexico.”

“Unfortunately, we’ve learned from our interrogations that they had been tipped off about the attack, and contrary to our belief, we didn’t kill a single member of the resistance. There was no one there to kill.”

“But we lost men in the attack. . . .”

“Yes, we did,” Hatch said. “The resistance was defending the ranch by remote to create the appearance of a battle. We have a clever adversary.” Hatch turned back to the council. “We’ll send Captain Smythe and his men from our Baja base to Christmas Ranch to bring back Vey, then destroy the ranch and all its inhabitants.”

“Who will we send to their French compound?” EGG Amon asked.

“The Domguard.”

The EGGs looked at one another.

“Do you have a problem with that, EGG Amon?” Hatch asked.

“No, sir,” Amon replied. “That’s precisely what I would recommend.”

“Good. Because it’s what we’re going to do.”

The Domguard, also known as the Order of the Amber Tunic, was the most elite of the Elgen special services and was considered even deadlier than the Lung Li. They received the highest level of combat training, comparable to military special ops, the Navy SEALs, Army Rangers, or Marine RECON.

The Domguard were stronger and larger than the other Elgen guards. But it wasn’t just their physical presence that made them stand out. Their attire was unique, consisting of a black-silk uniform with an insignia of an all-seeing eyeball, with the pupil in the form of the *taijitu*, the black-and-white yin-yang sign.

In addition, the Domguard wore an amber-colored cloth belt, signifying the Amber Tunic, an ancient occult society. Amber had special significance for the Elgen scientists and the Elgen in general. In fact, before the Elgen company was incorporated, it was, for a time, called Amberz. The word “electricity” came from the word “*elektron*,” the Greek name for amber. An early Greek philosopher noticed that amber, when rubbed by silk, would become magnetized and attract objects. That invisible power was called electricity.

In reality, the EGGs knew little about the Domguard, which was Hatch’s doing, since he reserved the force to serve as his personal guard and troops, loyal only to himself. If there were ever an attempted coup within the Elgen, it would be the Domguard who would crush it and restore Hatch to power.

When Hatch had returned to the Tuvalu plant from Hades, one of the first things he had done was put the Domguard on alert to be prepared to fly to Tuvalu. But he hadn’t given them the order yet, as they were currently his only troops in Europe, and with Schema, the former Elgen chairman, still abroad, Hatch couldn’t afford to leave that part of the world completely unattended.

“We’re still analyzing all the data we’ve received from the Glows and finalizing attack strategies,” Hatch said. “But here are the basics. To avoid the possibility of them warning each other, causing us to lose this priceless opportunity, we must simultaneously attack both strongholds. Since there’s an eight-hour time difference between the two locales and a night attack is always to our advantage, we plan to attack their French headquarters at four thirty a.m. using night vision. This would put our attack on Christmas Ranch at eight thirty p.m. mountain time, an hour after sunset.”

Hatch stepped back from the board to better emphasize his point. “I’m calling the French operations Operation Mute, since we’re finally silencing the voice. I’m calling the Utah sortie Operation Christmas Eve, for obvious reasons. Our objective is to bring back Coonradt from Europe and Sharon Vey from America.”

“What about the Glow Grace?” EGG Bosen asked. “Is she being held at the ranch?”

“Yes, she is. What about her?”

“Don’t we want her back?”

Hatch shook his head. “No. Only silenced. She can die with the rest of our enemy.” Hatch stood. “While we finalize the specifics of the attack plans, I want both forces moved into striking position. Bring the Domguard up from Rome into Turin, and the Apache Guard in Baja up into northern Nevada. I want them ready to strike at a moment’s notice. EGG Amon, I leave it to you to get them in place.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“What of the rebels?” Despain asked.

“They are, for the time being, stranded on Plutus and holed up in the depository, a situation we will soon remedy. Captain Shool of the Philippine Navy has agreed to shell the depository and deliver our army to the island to reclaim our property. He has also agreed to come on as our new chief admiral of naval operations.”

EGG Despain clapped, followed by the other EGGs. “Well done, sir,” he said.

“Thank you.” Hatch looked around the table at his council. “Does anyone else have anything to add?”

Amon raised his hand. “Yes, sir. I thought it might be appropriate, at this time, to invoke the words of the Elgen handbook. ‘A new day has dawned, not just for the world but for us. Rise up to this morning of a new dispensation, the *novus ordo glorificus Elgen*, and personal glory will follow.’”

“Thank you,” Hatch said. “And allow me to complete the charge. ‘*Elgen, I salute you!*’”



The Domguard Attacks

Hatch considered it a gift of fate that the Domguard were still stationed in Rome, so close to the resistance's European compound. The Domguard flew two Black Hawk helicopters from Rome to Turin, then refueled and waited for their final orders from EHQ. The order to attack came at two in the morning, and the helicopters lifted into the moist night air, flying north over the Italian Alps toward France. Unlike the Apache attack helicopters that the Elgen had used in the assault on Timepiece Ranch, the Black Hawks were designed for speed and troop transport, which at the moment was what was required.

The sun was still an hour from rising when the two helicopters descended in unison a quarter mile north of a thick forest of spruce and fir trees that surrounded the resistance's compound. The heavily wooded forest that had served to conceal and shelter the resistance now worked against them, as it provided cover for the Elgen force.

On their flight from Rome, the Domguard had been given a complete briefing on their mission, as well as electronic plans of the

compound's layout and security—a detailed sketch derived from Cassy's thoughts.

Twenty-five Elgen Domguards, using night-vision goggles, surrounded the compound. They set explosives and simultaneously blew up three different sections of the outer wall and the outside guard booth, killing the guard on watch. The blasts set off the compound's first alarms and effectively divided the resistance's security forces, as they broke up to cover the three breaches in the walls.

The resistance's headquarters relied more on secrecy than security, and without Cassy to help defend the installation, they were undermanned and outgunned. They were vulnerable. The wall breaches were a diversion and a trap, resulting in twelve of the resistance's guards being taken out immediately by the waiting snipers.

* * *

It was a quarter past two in the afternoon in Tuvalu when the Domguard started their attack, and Hatch, along with his EGGs—Amon, Grant, Bosen, and Despain—watched the covert operation unfold in his office, the attack playing out on twelve different monitors, captured by the night-vision cameras the Domguard wore on their helmets. It was like watching a video game except that the action figures—and the blood—were real.

The Domguard moved silently to surround the exits of the French château, the soft, rubberized soles of their boots barely making a sound on the mansion's black cobblestone driveway.

Samantha Scholes, Dr. Coonradt's personal assistant, had heard the explosions and, wearing only her nightgown, walked out onto the patio to see what was going on. She was immediately grabbed from behind by one of the Elgen guards. Since Hatch had ordered the guard to avoid noncombat casualties, Samantha was zipped up in a specially designed body bag and left in the yard.

The body bags, called PEQs by the Elgen (an abbreviation for "polyethylene quod"), were an ingenious Elgen invention. They were

basically pocket jail cells. The bags were lightweight, less than a pound, and folded up into a canister the size of a flashlight. The bags effectively bound, blindfolded, and muffled their victims, allowing just enough oxygen for the occupant to breathe if she didn't put up too much of a fuss—which worked well to control the captive inside. Since the bags were puncture resistant—resisting twelve hundred pounds per square inch—no one, even with a knife, could get out until they were let out. The bag's zipper was located on the outside of the bag, so it didn't even require a padlock to secure the occupant.

The compound's final guard was stationed on the main floor of the mansion in the video surveillance room. He was neutralized as he ran up the stairway to alert Dr. Coonradt of the danger.

Dr. Coonradt's room was at the end of the corridor on the home's third level, the wide, wood-paneled walls lined with deer and elk antlers. Coonradt had been up until two in the morning in communication with the board at Christmas Ranch and, upset that the Electroclan were still unaccounted for, had taken a sedative to help him sleep. The sleeping aid, in addition to the earplugs he wore, left him so isolated that, in spite of the explosions and alarms, he was still asleep when the three Domguards entered his room.

Dr. Coonradt was easily subdued by the powerful guards and handcuffed. Then a needle was shoved into his jugular vein, injecting him with methohexital—a barbiturate that rendered him completely unconscious in less than fifteen seconds. He was then placed faceup on the bed for Hatch to identify. It had been years since Hatch had seen the scientist, and seeing him brought back a flood of anger.

"That's him," Hatch said. "That's coon-rat. Bring him to me."

The guards radioed for transport; then they slid Dr. Coonradt into a PEQ. A guard carried him out of the room, with a guard in front and back, their weapons drawn, prepared for any resistance.

As they were descending the third-story stairs to the second floor, another occupant of the house walked out of his bedroom into the hallway. The man in shadow kept close to the wall, working his way toward the stairway. The guards crouched and silently watched him, giving command time to identify the individual. When Hatch realized

who the man was, he was as thrilled as a child finding a new bicycle under the Christmas tree.

“That’s Schema,” Hatch said, his voice shrill with excitement. “Bring him to me.” Hatch then said to the EEG, “If there were a god, besides me, I’d say he was on our side.”

The guards ordered Schema to his knees, and Hatch’s former boss knelt without resistance—in part because he was still half-asleep and terrified, but also because he had subconsciously resigned himself to the fact that he would someday be captured by the Elgen who had put a million-euro bounty on his head.

Schema was also injected with the barbiturate and placed into another PEQ. Then the two men were carried out of the mansion.

With the compound cleared, the first Elgen helicopter landed in the yard next to the house, and the Domguard stowed their precious cargo inside. Ten other guards hurried in after them; then the helicopter quickly took off.

The second helicopter landed a minute after the first had cleared the space, and the remaining fifteen guards climbed inside. Then she too lifted off, leaving the compound smoking and violated, and Samantha wriggling helplessly in her PEQ bag, looking like an oversize, rubber caterpillar. After years of battling the resistance, the entire operation had taken less than forty minutes to complete.

The Black Hawks could cruise at speeds upward of 183 miles per hour, so it took less than three hours to return to Turin. Dr. Coonradt and Schema both woke during the flight, but since they were still confined in the PEQs, they were unable to resist or communicate. That too was Hatch’s plan. Hatch was worried about Dr. Coonradt’s intelligence and his power of persuasion, so the guards had been ordered not to communicate with their prisoner.

After refueling in Turin, the helicopters flew to Rome, where Coonradt and Schema were transferred to an Elgen jet. Once on board, they were let out of the PEQs but handcuffed and hooded. They were flown to Dubai, where the jet refueled; then Hong Kong; and then to their final destination in Funafuti, where Hatch was waiting.



Christmas Ranch

While Operation Mute was being carried out on the other side of the world, Captain Smythe, the same commander who had led the attack on Timepiece Ranch in northern Mexico, had commenced his own operation.

Smythe's helicopter squad had been static since the Timepiece attack, awaiting a transport to Tuvalu, which would require a boat since it was much too far for the helicopters to fly. Again, fate seemed to favor the Elgen. After three delays caused by weather, the squad was still in Mexico and ready for the mission Hatch was sending them on. The helicopter squad not only had experience in attacking the resistance's ranch, but they were also the only unit within three thousand miles of the target.

The two operations were launched simultaneously. Prior to the attack, Smythe's squad made the 375-mile flight to northern Nevada, where the helicopters landed at a private airport and refueled. From there it was only 160 miles to Christmas Ranch. If all went according to plan, they would fly in from the south over the Vermilion Cliffs and attack the ranch just after nightfall.

At seven forty-five p.m. mountain time, Captain Smythe received GPS coordinates for the ranch, detailed attack plans, and orders to attack. The eleven Elgen helicopters flew across the Nevada border, closely following the rugged desert canyon terrain. It took them just thirty-four minutes to reach the ranch, the only structures within miles of the national park.

With Gervaso and the youths gone and no advance warning, Christmas Ranch was ripe for picking, even less well defended than the European headquarters, with only three men on guard duty: two guarding the outer roads and one on the water tower.

The Elgen's attack orders were simple: capture Sharon Vey, then destroy the ranch and all its inhabitants. The battle plan was to silently take out the water tower guard, then drop three teams of jumpers to capture Vey. (The guards had pictures of Sharon taped to their forearms.) Once she was secured, they would attack the ranch by air with their full payload of Hellfire missiles and napalm.

"This is Elgen One. Destination is one mile ahead," Captain Smythe said. "Prepare jumpers. Release on my command."

In the dark, Smythe's helicopter dropped lower than the rest until it was only slightly above the tree line. It quickly approached the west side of the ranch, carefully following the contour of the land until it was about twelve hundred yards from the water tower, and an Elgen sniper with a night-vision scope silently took out the watchman.

The helicopter quickly gained altitude, then did a flyby over the quiet ranch. There were enough commercial tour helicopters flying over Zion that the helicopter's presence did not alarm the ranch's inhabitants, but Smythe wasn't taking chances. Still, there was no movement below, and most of the buildings were dark.

"Drop jumpers," Smythe said.

At ten thousand feet, twelve paratroopers jumped with Ram-chute parachutes from four of the helicopters. It was higher than their usual drop, as the helicopters were still hoping to avoid detection. The Elgen jumpers free-fell until about two thousand feet before pulling their chutes and landing just fifty yards south of the water tower, three hundred yards from the main ranch house. Only one of the

Elgen had a problem as his chute caught in a cedar tree and he had to cut himself down.

Captain Smythe in Elgen One continued north to the resistance's road outposts, where he flew down on the two guards, neutralizing them with machine-gun fire.

* * *

The ranch had gone dark earlier than usual. It had been a hard day, and Sharon Vey had been crying for most of it. It was over a week since the Electroclan had been heard from, and the resistance had convened a meeting to discuss a possible rescue mission even though the odds were that the Electroclan was already dead. The meeting was emotional and tense, and nothing had been decided. The Lisses were beside themselves, and Mrs. Liss had screamed at the board. Sharon was angry at herself that she hadn't stopped her son from participating in a suicide mission.

She was alone in her room getting ready for bed when the guards kicked open her door.

"That's her," a guard said, pointing his pistol with a silencer. "Scream and I shoot."

The guards put Sharon in a PEQ, radioed the helicopter for pickup, and then carried her out back to where they had landed, waving a green laser into the air to signal the helicopter their position.

A few minutes later a chopper descended. The two troopers threw Vey inside, then climbed in themselves. "Fly," the guard said.

After they were a thousand feet in the air, Captain Smythe came to the back of the Apache and unzipped the PEQ enough for Sharon to put out her head.

"Who are you?" Sharon asked.

"I'm Captain Smythe."

"Elgen?"

"How many enemies do you have?" Smythe asked.

"Where's my son?"

"You don't have the clearance to know that."

"Where are you taking me?"

“You don’t have the clearance to know that.”

“What can you tell me?”

“I can tell you that it’s time to say good-bye to your friends.” He reached back to the control for his microphone. “This is Elgen One. All helos cleared to launch Hellfire missiles on my command. Lethal force is authorized. I repeat, lethal force is authorized.”

“Please . . . don’t,” Sharon said. “You don’t have to hurt them.”

“As a matter of fact I do.” The captain said into his microphone, “All helos let missiles fly.”

“Hellfire missiles away,” came a multitude of replies.

From her window Sharon could see dozens of missiles streaking fire against the black sky, sixteen from each helicopter, scattering across the ranch in a broad swathe, blowing everything apart.

“Elgen Nine and Eleven, fire napalm,” the captain said.

“Elgen Nine. Roger that, One. Napalm firing.”

“Elgen Eleven. Napalm firing.”

More missiles struck the ground, only these lit up the sky with a row of flames three hundred yards long and more than a hundred feet high, the tops of the flames curling with the helicopters’ downdraft.

“God’s wrath,” Captain Smythe said. “Thank you, Nine and Eleven.” The captain set down the microphone and turned back to Sharon. “Are you a God-fearing woman, Mrs. Vey?”

Sharon said nothing, though tears streamed down her cheeks. Her lips were tight with anger.

“You might not believe this,” Smythe said, “but I was an altar boy. Saint Vincent’s in Cherry Creek, New Jersey. I even thought of becoming a priest someday. Imagine that.”

Sharon looked at him hatefully.

“I’m still spiritual. I just chose a different way to do God’s work. Something a little more . . . deliberate.” He took a deep breath. “Look at that down there. It’s biblical. The ‘heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up.’” He shook his head. “We are the destroying angels. Unfortunately, your friends are no more.” He lifted the microphone. “This is Elgen One.

Mission accomplished. All helos return to Vegas base. Let the beer flow, boys. Tonight it's on me."



40

Bait

The Apache helicopters landed in Vegas, and Sharon Vey was moved to the Elgen's Gulfstream jet, which was waiting for them on the runway, fueled and ready for takeoff. Drenched in her own sweat, Sharon was taken out of the PEQ, handcuffed, and then handed over to the two guards who were waiting to escort her to Tuvalu.

The flight from the U.S. to Tuvalu was a little more than five thousand miles, with only one stop in Honolulu, less than a third of the distance that Dr. Coonradt and Schema were flown. The Gulfstream landed a full twelve hours before Dr. Coonradt arrived.

The guards, at Hatch's instruction, had informed Sharon of the success of Operation Mute and the capture of the voice. He wanted her completely broken and hopeless before she arrived. The jet had also briefly circled Hades, and the guards had made Sharon look down at the charred and still smoking island.

"What happened down there?" Sharon asked.

"You'll find out soon enough," the guard next to her answered cryptically.

Twenty-two minutes later the jet touched down on the Nike runway. Hatch, with his newly received information about the whereabouts of the Tuvaluan rebels, was no longer worried about leaving the Starxource plant, and he, along with six of his guards, met the plane as it landed.

The jet taxied up to where Hatch stood, and the door opened. A guard was the first to emerge, followed closely by the still handcuffed Sharon and then another guard. Her eyes flashed when she saw Hatch.

“Where’s my son?” she shouted.

Hatch grinned. “It’s good to see you too, Sharon. When was the last time—Peru?”

“Where is he?”

“I knew you’d ask. That’s why I had the pilot make a brief flyover of Hades. Did you look out the window?”

“Where’s my son?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. That smoking, burning island? That’s your son. At least what’s left of him. He went supernova on us and destroyed the island. He killed thousands of my men. He killed his friends. Like a suicide bomber with a nuclear weapon strapped to his back. You’ve got to hand it to him, he really went out with a bang.”

“You’re lying.”

“I wish I was. But we both know I’m not. Michael killed some of my best soldiers and sank almost all of my boats. In its own way, it was a valiant last stand—a Hail Mary pass of epic proportions. So you can, at least, find solace in the fact that no one killed your son. He did it himself. Misguided as he was, you could even call him a hero.”

“No!” Sharon shouted.

“I know it must be painful to hear all this, but it’s about choice, Sharon. Michael’s choice. Parents need to let their children make choices. And now you’re going to make choices.”

“Why did you bring me here? Why didn’t you just let me die with the rest of my friends?”

“Leverage,” Hatch said. “I needed a little leverage. Or perhaps I should say *bait*.”

“Bait for whom?” Sharon said. “You’ve already killed everyone.”

“Not everyone, Sharon. Not yet, at least. But, with your help, I soon will.” He turned to her escorting guard. “Take her to Cell 9 in East Block.”



Truth Serum

Dr. Coonradt's plane landed at two in the morning. Hatch didn't meet him, not because he was worried about being out of the protection of the Starxource plant; rather he didn't want to extend the courtesy to Dr. Coonradt or disrupt his own sleep. Hatch gave the guards specific instructions. After the exhausting flight, Coonradt was not allowed to lie down to sleep; he was taken directly to a cell and strapped to a chair with the cell lights on. He was to be given nothing to drink, nor was he allowed to leave the chair for any reason, even to use the toilet.

"It smells in here," Hatch said, walking into the cell.

Coonradt looked at him angrily. "That's because you just walked in."

"No," Hatch said. "That's because you have soiled yourself." He walked over next to his prisoner. "So news of your death was premature."

Coonradt glared at him but said nothing.

"Really, Steven, I've got to know, did you honestly send your electric kids here to steal my boat?"

Coonradt didn't answer.

"I probably wouldn't answer either if I were you. It's hard to imagine such cowardice, even from you. Sending kids to do something you wouldn't do yourself. They should hate you more than they hate me. If you were half a man, you would have come yourself."

Hatch looked into Coonradt's eyes. "But that's all you are, less than half a man. Maybe I should dress you in a diaper and bonnet and put you on display." Hatch condescendingly patted Coonradt on the head. "You know, that might have possibility. I've considered creating the world's first human zoo. Someday it will be necessary, as humans slide off into oblivion. You would make a lovely exhibit. How amusing."

"You've finally gone mad, Jim."

Hatch's eyes flashed. "That's 'Admiral-General Hatch' to you."

Dr. Coonradt grinned darkly. "It's telling that you were less bothered by me calling you *insane* than by me not using your self-appointed title. Mental hospitals are filled with men who think they're kings or Jesus. Make no mistake, Admiral-General King of the World, or whatever lunatic name you want to call yourself, you're still just Jimmy Hatch from Minnesota, the megalomaniac. The only change I see in you is the extent of your psychosis."

Hatch punched him in the face, then grabbed his own hand in pain.

Coonradt reeled back as blood trickled down from his nose. "Why didn't you just kill me?"

"Everyone keeps asking me that," Hatch said, rubbing his hand. "I'll get around to it. Eventually. But after all this cat and mouse, where's the fun of that? Most important, there's information in your head that I need."

"I won't tell you anything."

"You'll tell me everything," Hatch said calmly. "I've got a little help." He pushed a button on his pocket microphone. "Send her in."

The door opened, and Zara walked into the room. Dr. Coonradt eyed her carefully, then, when she was a few yards from him, said, "Hello, Zara. How have you been?"

Zara looked confused. "How do you know who I am?"

"I know all my creations."

Zara froze. She turned back to Hatch as if for an explanation, but he just folded his arms at his chest. She said to Dr. Coonradt, "You didn't make me. Dr. Hatch made me."

"Jimmy Hatch? Yeah, right. Jimmy couldn't make a tuna sandwich let alone an electric human. So I'm assuming you borrowed Taylor's powers and you now read minds."

Zara again looked stumped. "How did you know that?"

"You don't have to read minds to know what Hatch is up to. . . . He might as well have a transparent skull. So ask him who made you."

Zara turned back to Hatch. "You lied to me."

"No, I didn't."

"I can read your mind."

"Dr. Coonradt was the scientist I hired to create the MEI. *He* worked for *me*. Therefore, his creation is mine."

"Actually, you didn't hire me," Dr. Coonradt said. "I was with Elgen Inc. before you darkened their lobby. But that's beside the point. What you said is illogical. It's like saying I own an iPod, so I'm a musician."

"Enough," Hatch said. "On with the interrogation, Zara."

"Yes, sir," Zara said. She walked behind Dr. Coonradt's chair so she wouldn't have to look at him. "I'm ready."

"Tell me, Doctor. Who is really behind this resistance?"

Coonradt looked down but said nothing.

"Nothing," Zara said. "It's some song in his head."

"Let me try this. Are you working with Dr. Carl Vey?"

"I got an affirmative," Zara said.

Hatch nodded. "So Vey isn't dead."

"No, sir," Zara said.

"Where do I find him?"

Zara hesitated. "He's not sure. Vey moves around a lot."

"How do you reach him?"

"There's a phone number. He's doing the song again." After five minutes Zara had a few numbers, but they were random. "He's just throwing out numbers."

"Okay, there's another way." He opened his desk and brought out a syringe.

“You just keep that in there?” Coonradt asked.

“I had it brought in special for you.”

“Pentothal?”

“Nice guess. Truth serum.”

“You know it’s not reliable.”

“What you say while on it isn’t reliable. What you are unable to keep yourself from thinking is a different matter.” He inserted the needle into Coonradt’s arm and pressed the plunger. “That shouldn’t take long.”

Within a few minutes Coonradt was struggling to keep his head up.

“Grab a pen,” Hatch said to his guard. “Keep at it, Zara.”

“Dr. Coonradt, what is the phone number you use to contact Carl Vey?”

Zara began writing. “I got it. It’s 33 . . . 555 . . . 5876 . . . 3214.”

“Country code 33,” Hatch said. “It’s a French number.” He took out his phone and dialed. It rang three times before a once familiar voice answered. “Steven, do you have word on Michael?”

“I have word,” Hatch said. “But this isn’t Steven.”

There was a long pause. “Who is this?”

“You know who this is, Carl. It’s your old pal Jim. I wanted you to know how much I enjoyed your funeral. I even sent flowers. Did you see them?”

“How did you get this number?”

“You know that for me to get this number everything would have to be brought down. And it has. It’s over, Vey. Your resistance has failed. It’s over, except for you.”

“Where’s Michael?”

“You sound like your wife,” Hatch said. “So I’ll tell you what I told her. Your son is no more. He turned himself into a bomb and did a whole lot of damage. Most important, he was killed on the mission that you sent him on. It’s ironic, isn’t it? For years he believed that he killed you, while in the end, it was you who killed him.” Hatch sniffed. “He died not even knowing that you were still alive. And you call me evil.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Of course you don’t. That would be far too easy and logical. Besides, the liar never believes others. So whose words would you accept?”

“Steven Coonradt’s.”

“I could get him, but he wasn’t here when your son died, so he couldn’t really say for sure. Who else?”

“Gervaso.”

“No, I’m afraid you killed him as well. Would you like a list of survivors? The ones you didn’t kill?”

“Let me talk to Ostin.”

“Ostin. No can do. He too is on that list. Died in Hades.”

“Get me Cassy.”

“Cassy. Yes. That I can do. It will be a moment; she’s in her cell.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll be hanging up,” Vey said.

“Of course. You don’t want us to track you, do you? Call back in, say, ten.”

Vey hung up.

Hatch said to his guards, “Bring me Cassy.” Then he added, “And Sharon Vey. I think it’s time we reunited the happy couple.”

Nearly ten minutes later Cassy was brought into the room. She froze when she saw Coonradt, who was softly babbling. “Hello, Cassy,” he said.

Cassy started crying. “I’m so sorry.”

Coonradt just mumbled.

The phone rang and Hatch answered. “You always were right on time, Carl,” Hatch said. “As reliable as a Swiss watch. I love that about you. Now here’s Cassy.”

Hatch handed the phone to the girl. She took it cautiously and pressed it against her tearstained face. She swallowed. “Hello?”

“Is this Cassy?”

“Yes.”

“This is Carl Vey.”

“I know who you are.”

“Where’s Michael?”

Her voice cracked. “He’s gone.”

Vey’s voice fell. “What happened?”

“He turned himself into a bomb.”

Vey was quiet for a long time. Then he said, “Who else do they have?”

“They have everyone. Dr. Coonradt. Your wife.”

“Sharon?”

“Aw, she ruined my surprise,” Hatch said, grabbing the phone from Cassy. He turned to his guards. “Take hot little Cassy back to her cell.” He lifted the phone. “You heard that, Vey. I have *everyone*. Everyone who’s still alive, at least. Just try calling your French château or your Christmas Ranch, you’ll find no one’s home.

“But now comes the moment you’ve been waiting for. I think it’s time you talk to your wife and explain to her how you killed your son. It might be a bit tricky, seeing how she still thinks you’re dead. But seriously, this is, like, big drama moment. This is going to be a treat.”

“Just get her,” Vey said.

“Really? You’ve been hiding for eight years, and suddenly you can’t wait another minute to talk to her? Patience, Vey.”

“Let me talk to Sharon.”

“You will. We’re just waiting for her to arrive.” He put the phone on mute. “Where’s Sharon Vey?”

“She’s almost here, sir.”

Two minutes later Sharon walked into the room. “What do you want?” she asked Hatch tersely.

“Someone sounds like she’s having a bad day,” Hatch said. He offered her the phone. “You have a phone call.”

“Is it Michael?”

“Sharon, you’re killing me. You have to accept that Michael is gone. It’s someone else you care about.”

She looked at Hatch, then took the phone. “Hello.”

“Sharon.”

There was a long pause. “Who is this?”

“It’s Carl.”

Sharon began to tremble. “No. You’re dead.”

“Honey, I’m not dead.”

“I don’t believe you. What did you say to me when you asked me to marry you?”

“I just said, ‘Will you marry me?’”

“No. You said more.”

Vey was silent a moment, then said, “I said, ‘You could do worse.’”

Sharon began to cry. “Where have you been? You left us to all this.”

“You don’t think this has been killing me? I was saving your lives. Hatch was killing everyone who knew about the MEI.”

“You didn’t save our lives,” Sharon said. “We’re about to die. And you ruined the rest of them.”

Hatch snatched back the phone. “You did not disappoint, old friend. So tell me, was that worth the wait? The bigger question is, will she ever forgive you? Of course, it’s a moot question, since your time is short. You should know, she did fall in love with someone else in your resistance, but, not to worry, I took care of him for you. You can thank me for that later.”

“What do you want from me?” Vey asked.

“You know what I want, Carl. I want you. I want you to surrender yourself to my guards and come to the Hatch Islands.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Firstly, because you don’t want your friends’ blood on your hands. Because if you don’t come, I will start killing them, one by one. Coonradt . . . Cassy . . . the entire Electroclan that your son started. . . .

“Secondly, you don’t want your beautiful wife tortured and killed. Your lovely Rose of Sharon. Sharon the pain.”

“How do I know you won’t just kill them anyway?”

“You don’t. You’ll just have to believe me. But you can be assured that if you don’t come, they will *all* die. I’m sure you won’t have any trouble believing me when I say that. And I will video tape each of their final moments just for you. I will make them thank you for killing them just before they breathe their last breath. And, since I’ve destroyed the rest of the resistance, you will spend the rest of your life as a fugitive, running with a ten-million-dollar bounty on your head. For that much money your own mother would turn you in.”

Vey was silent a moment, then said, “What do you want me to do?”

“You will fly to Rome immediately. There you will be greeted by the Domguard. They will bring you to me.”

“All right.”

“Very well. Let’s see if you’re a man of your word. You have twenty-four hours to be in the Domguard’s custody before I start killing. Do you understand?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good. I look forward to seeing you again. We all do.” Hatch hung up his phone and smiled. “And the walls came tumbling down.”

PART SIXTEEN



Visitors

It was the morning of the fifth day on Plutus. Enele looked out the gap in the fourth-story wall of the depository, toward his home island of Funafuti. It was four days since they'd sequestered themselves inside, and still no sign of an Elgen attack. It wasn't a question of if they would come, only when. The Elgen knew the Tuvaluans were there. There was no question of that, as the rebels were being regularly monitored by Elgen drones. Twice a day and once at night they'd come, always circling the island just out of gunshot range, watching for movement. But still no attack. Enele knew what Hatch was waiting for. He was rebuilding his army while Enele's grew weaker.

Hatch had all the time in the world. He had stranded Enele and his men on the island and guaranteed that they would remain there. Just six hours after Enele's army had finished carrying all their weapons and supplies into the depository, a fleet of Elgen helicopters—twelve fully-armed Apaches—flew in from the east. They passed over the depository in formation, then, circling back, commenced their mission.

It was easy to conclude what their mission was. They didn't fire once at the building; instead they focused their missiles and guns on the boats docked in the harbor. They performed their operation efficiently. Just fifteen minutes after they arrived, they were headed back to their base, leaving Enele's boats shredded, sinking, and burning in the harbor.

The ES *Proton*, the only real ship Enele had had left, was, missile by missile, blown to pieces, her burning wreckage scattered and floating in pieces around the harbor.

In addition to their missiles, the Apaches carried M230 chain guns mounted beneath the helicopters that fired 30mm bullets at the rate of 625 bullets a minute. The helicopters strafed the ground so thoroughly that even the smallest of Enele's rafts was so riddled by bullets that it looked more like a block of Swiss cheese than a flotation device.

Four days, Enele thought now. *When will it come?* Or maybe it wouldn't. Perhaps Hatch's plan was to just wait until they ran out of food and water. If the gods were generous, he and his men could capture rainwater for drinking, but food was a different matter. Even with rationing, Enele's army wouldn't survive more than two months.

Enele's thoughts were suddenly broken by something he hadn't heard in a while: the sound of boat engines. But they weren't coming from the east. Enele ran to the other side of the floor and looked out over the enclosed Nukufetau harbor. Amid the wreckage of their ships there were nineteen boats of different shapes and sizes headed their way. Enele grabbed his radio. "Adam, you see that?"

"Yes, sir. We've got visitors."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know. I'll go out to meet them."

"Be careful," Enele said. "Consider them hostile. Send some men up to me, and we'll cover you from here."

"Roger," Adam said.

A minute later four soldiers ran up the stairs. "We're here," the first said.

Following Enele's instruction, they pointed two of their machine guns out toward the harbor. Two of the boats had already docked, and

their occupants started to disembark. None of them appeared to be carrying guns. Then Adam, flanked by six armed soldiers, walked up to them. The men spoke for a moment, then, to Enele's surprise, embraced.

"I'm going down," Enele said. "Hold your fire unless we're fired on." He ran down the stairs. As he reached the main floor, the front door opened. Adam walked in. "Enele. I have someone to see you."

Enele walked forward to see who it was. Standing just inside the doorway were Jack and Ostin. Enele immediately threw up his arms. "Jack! Ostin!"

"Enele," Jack said. They came together and hugged.

"What are you doing back here?" Enele asked. "I thought you had escaped."

"So did we," Jack said. "The Philippine Navy captured the *Joule*. We're the only ones who got away. We came back to save them and help you."

"Who are 'we'?"

"Our new friends," Jack said. He turned back and said, "Come on in, you guys."

Vishal, Alveeta, and the MAS crew all stepped inside the depository.

"In Fiji we met Vishal and Alveeta," Jack said.

Vishal and Alveeta stepped forward.

"Enele," Alveeta said. "Do you remember me?"

"Of course, my friend." The men embraced. "I haven't seen you since grade school. You look the same."

"I weigh the same," Alveeta said with a slight laugh. "I am here with Vishal. He is the leader of the Tuvaluan resistance. Now we will follow you."

"I'm Vishal," Vishal said, extending his hand. "It is an honor to meet you, Enele Saluni. You come from a great family."

"Where did you come from?" Enele asked.

"There were about two hundred of us who were out of the country when the Elgen attacked. We've been waiting for the right time. When Jack and Ostin told us that you were rallying our people, we knew it was time."

“I would someday like to hear how that came about,” Enele said. “But we haven’t time now. You have two hundred soldiers?”

“Almost two hundred, though we’re not much for soldiers. We’re mostly salesmen and professionals. But we are willing to fight and die for our country.”

“That is good,” Enele said. “We have an army. Did you see any drones as you came in?”

“No,” Ostin said.

“Good. That is how they watch us. Come in. Have you eaten?”

“Yes,” Vishal said. “Likely better than you. We have supplies and weapons on our boats.”

“Adam,” Enele said. “Take a hundred men and help our friends unload their boats. Then hide their boats wherever you can. There is a mangrove forest a mile north of here; they might be safe there. Then hurry back. I am convening a war council.”

“Yes, sir,” Adam said.



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Fate Favors the Bold

Adam returned to find Enele seated around a long table with Jack, Ostin, Nazil, Tomas, Raphe, Captain Pio, Alveeta, and Vishal.

“You are just in time,” Enele said. “How did it go?”

“We brought in about two hundred guns and ammunition and about a ton and a half of food.”

“That is good,” Enele said. “Now please close the door and be seated.”

Adam shut the door, then sat down at the end of the table. Enele stood. His eyes looked tired but hard, and his voice was weary but clear.

“Soldiers of Tuvalu, this is our situation. We are stranded here. We have seven hundred and fifty-eight soldiers with weapons and ammunition. If we carefully ration, we have enough food to last perhaps just over two months. That is basic survival. We have new boats, but it would take several—at least four—sorties of all the boats to move our soldiers from here to Funafuti. It is doubtful that we

could make so many trips without being seen by the Elgen drones and attacked before reaching land.”

“. . . And we are low on fuel,” Vishal said. “We could not make the trip four times without refueling.”

“There is that, too,” Enele said. “This is our predicament. If the Elgen decide to wait us out, we are at their mercy. We will eventually run out of food, then be forced to either surrender or attack, with only a portion of our army against their strongest island. By that time it is likely that Hatch will have rebuilt most of his forces. I’m afraid it will not go well.”

“That would be a highly uncharacteristic stratagem for Dr. Hatch,” Ostin said.

The men looked at one another. “What did he say?” Adam asked Jack.

“He means Dr. Hatch probably won’t do that because he doesn’t like to wait.” Jack looked around the table. “I’m learning to speak Ostinese.”

Ostin continued. “It would be the logical thing to do, but it’s not Hatch’s way. He likes to strike hard with speed and force and take what he wants. Just like he attacked Tuvalu.”

“Then why hasn’t he attacked already?” Tomas asked.

“Because he’s rebuilding his forces,” Vishal said. “He is bringing in his guard from around the world. In Fiji there are Elgen guard everywhere. They are coming from Samoa and Taiwan and many other places.”

“He has more than just guards,” Jack said. “He’s using other governments’ militaries. Like the Philippine Navy that captured us.”

Enele looked grim. “The elder was right. The evil one has already grown stronger than we realized.” He breathed out slowly. “So, my friends. What do we do?”

“I have an idea,” Raphe said.

Everyone turned to hear what he had to say.

Raphe was one of the youngest in the room and looked around the table nervously. “I don’t like the idea of sitting here waiting for them to come kill us. At night, the drones only pass overhead once. We could take two boats and sail them outside of the drone’s flight

pattern to the northeast shore of Funafuti. It is a wooded area. We could take a hundred people each night and slowly amass our army and weapons.

“We would leave enough men here, just a half dozen or so, to give the appearance that we are all still here. As you said, Hatch strikes with speed and force. He will send all his men to the depository, leaving none back. When he leaves, our army attacks the plant and captures it and all its weapons. Then we blow up the dock to slow their return. We will have the advantage, and we can call all our people to us. We will have thousands of soldiers.”

“It will be a death sentence for those who stay,” Adam said.

“I don’t think so,” Raphe said. “It is no more dangerous than for those who fight. The ones who stay here will lock themselves in with more food and supplies than they could ever use. If we fail and the Elgen destroy us and then come back to reclaim Plutus, our men can slip off in the night amid the many soldiers.”

The room was silent. Enele looked around the table, then said, “What do you think?”

“It makes sense to me,” Nazil said.

“And me,” Tomas added. “I think if we just wait, we are playing into the Elgen’s plans, not ours.”

“Captain Pio?”

The captain nodded. “We can make the trips, but we still have the problem with fuel.”

“We would have to find some in Funafuti,” Raphe said. “Do we have enough to make two trips?”

“We do,” Vishal said. “But if we’re just taking two or three boats a night, we could take fuel from the other boats until we find more.”

Enele looked at Vishal. “Vishal? Alveeta? What do you think?”

“I like the idea,” Vishal said.

“Me too,” Alveeta said.

“Jack?”

Jack looked vexed. “I think it’s crazy.” Everyone looked at him. “But what choice do we have? If we just wait here, we’ll die for sure.”

“Ostin?”

Ostin shook his head. "Jack's right, it's risky, but not riskier than doing nothing. It's a little like what we did in Peru. I need more time to process it."

"What do you think?" Adam asked Enele.

"I'd like to think it over as well," Enele said. "I think you are all correct in saying that to wait for the Elgen's time line is suicide. They won't attack until they are certain to achieve victory."

"There is one more possibility," Tomas said.

"What's that?" Enele asked.

"We could take the boats not to Funafuti but to the other islands and disperse our forces. We could then practice the *Bati Kadi*, attacking the Elgen as individual cells."

Enele thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No. Tuvalu is too small. Once the Elgen have rebuilt their force, they would hunt us down and exterminate us as well as all those who provided for us.

"Right now I am leaning toward Raphe's plan, but I must think more on it. Does anyone else have anything to say?" He looked around the room. No one spoke. "No? Then get your lunch; we will meet again in a few hours."

The men all stood to leave. As Jack and Ostin were about to walk out of the room, Enele said, "Jack, Ostin, please wait. I'd like to speak with you."

"Sure," Jack said.

Once everyone else was gone, Enele said, "Shut the door, please."

Ostin closed the door, and he and Jack sat down. Enele looked at Ostin. "What is it about the plan that you don't agree with?"

"I didn't say I disagreed. I said I needed more time to process."

Enele nodded. "I need to ask you something very important."

"Yes, sir."

"How did you know to find us here?"

Ostin hesitated, unsure of how Enele would respond to the truth. Before he could answer, Jack said, "We had a dream."

Enele looked at him. "A dream?"

"Don't think I'm crazy," Jack said. "It happened."

"I don't think you're crazy. You're here; that's proof in itself. Was there anything more in the dream?"

Ostin and Jack glanced at each other, unsure of how much they should share. Ostin said, "There were a few things. We were told that we would be attacked by the Elgen. But . . . someone would help us."

"Who?" Enele looked incredibly eager. Still, Ostin was hesitant to answer.

". . . Why are you afraid to speak?" Enele asked.

Ostin fidgeted. "Because it sounds crazy."

Enele looked back and forth between them. "Tell me, friends. What really happened back at Hades? What caused that explosion?"

Ostin said, "We can't be completely sure, but we're pretty sure it was Michael."

"Michael Vey set off the explosion?"

Ostin shook his head. "Michael *was* the explosion."

Enele's brow furrowed. "Explain."

"Michael was one of the electric kids." When Enele didn't respond, Ostin said, "One of the Glows. Do you know what that is?"

Enele nodded. "Yes, I know about the Glows."

"But he was different from the others. Something about the way his body handled electricity. He could hold it."

"Like a battery," Jack said.

"Exactly, except, with his power, he could increase it. What I think happened, Michael knew we were about to be overrun, so he climbed the radio tower in order to get hit by lightning. That's when he sent us to the bunker. I think he was struck by lightning and managed to hold it. Maybe for just a fraction of a second, but long enough to amplify it. He turned himself into a bomb. And blew himself up along with everything else. It was like the biggest lightning bolt ever struck the island and blew everything away."

"That would explain why the sand turned to glass," Enele said.

Ostin nodded.

"So let me ask you this—perhaps it is what you are afraid of speaking. What do you know of the lightning god?"

"*Uira te Atua*," Ostin said.

Enele's eyes grew wide. "How do you know that name?"

"Michael told us in the dream. But we don't know anything about it. What do you know?"

“The elder told me that even though we had beaten the Elgen army at Hades, Hatch was not as weak as we believed and had already brought in other armies to serve him, which you verified today is true.”

“Straight up,” Jack said.

“He said that we should take shelter here, on this island, because we would be fiercely attacked. He said that there would be an opportunity for success when *Uira te Atua* came.”

“What is the *Uira te Atua*?” Ostin asked.

“There’s something you don’t know?” Jack said.

“As smart as Ostin is,” Enele said, “he could not possibly know the meaning of that word. The word is sacred and not often spoken in public. It is not even Tuvaluan. It’s from a language even older than ours, long before there was writing, when our history was handed down in stories from the elders. The word refers to an ancient legend that someday a great one would come to save us in our troubles. *Uira te Atua*, the lightning god.”

“The lightning god,” Ostin repeated.

“The elder said that when *Uira te Atua* came to deliver us, we would know that it was time to expel the evil one and liberate Funafuti. Now you tell me that your friend, Michael, was struck by lightning and . . . comes to you in dreams?”

“We believe so,” Ostin said.

“But he is dead?”

“Anyone else would be dead. But Michael’s not anyone else.”

“The dream we had,” Jack said. “We’re not sure it’s a dream.”

Enele slowly shook his head. “Do you think Michael could be . . . the lightning god?”

Ostin scratched his head. “I don’t know. He’s no god; he’s just our friend.”

“If he can hold lightning, he is a god. Perhaps not *the* God, but to us, a god all the same.”

“So what do we do now?” Jack asked.

Enele shook his head. “I was hoping you could enlighten me.”

“Logically,” Ostin said, “Raphe’s idea makes the most sense. But it seems counter to the elder’s prophecy.”

Enele thought for a moment, then said, "Perhaps it is a problem that people don't have faith in prophecy, so they try to make their prophecy happen, instead of trusting in it. Destiny is chasing us, not the other way around. We cannot guess destiny's mind nor her course. In such cases, we must move ahead and make the best decisions we can. Fate has always favored the bold."

Jack nodded in agreement. "I agree."

"Okay," Ostin said. "Then we'll follow Raphe's plan unless something else comes up."

"Then it's agreed," Enele said. "There's no time to waste. We'll send out our first boats tonight."



Payload

Enele's war council met again a little after sunset. They decided that since the first trip would be the riskiest, they would start with just one boat and ten men to find a place to gather in secret. The boat would leave right after the drone had passed by, since it had been coming fairly regularly at about three a.m. Captain Nikhil volunteered to take his boat and captain the first sortie.

"You are brave," Enele said.

"It is why I came," Nikhil said.

"You must get some sleep while the others prepare your boat."

"I'll take watch," Jack said.

Enele nodded. "If you are willing, I will leave you in charge of the fortress tonight."

"I'm willing," Jack said. "Good night."

"Good night," Enele replied.

As Adam and Enele walked to the sleeping quarters, Adam asked, "Are you okay leaving such a young man in charge of our defense?"

Enele looked at him. "Of course. In the last battle I worked for him."

* * *

Ostin and Jack went up to the open fourth floor. The stars shown brilliantly above them like a million pinpricks in a black velvet canvas. There were three other watchmen, one at each wall.

“Do you have any idea how close we are to our friends?” Ostin said.

“No.”

“Really close. Just sixty miles. If we had a telescope, we could see Funafuti.”

“They might as well be on the moon,” Jack said, looking out. He turned back. “Do you think Ian can see us?”

“Yes.”

Jack nodded. “Somehow that makes me feel good.”

“If he’s still alive,” Ostin added.

Jack sighed. “Well, that *did* make me feel good.” He walked over and looked out the west side of the floor. He could see the men preparing the *MAS*. He said back to Ostin, “Did you ever figure out what ‘MAS’ stood for?”

“‘Men at sea,’” Ostin said.

“Could be,” Jack said. “It’s a lot better than what I just came up with.”

“What’s that?”

“‘Mexicans and Spaniards.’”

* * *

Two hours later Vishal came up to the fourth floor carrying a woven basket filled with food. Seeing how Enele had greeted them, he had gained even more respect for the two young men.

“I brought you some food.”

“Thanks,” Jack said. “You should be sleeping.”

“I know. I couldn’t sleep.”

Jack looked through the basket. There was salted fish and small loaves of bread. He took out a loaf and ripped it in half, then put a fish inside. “Look at us,” he said to Ostin. “A raw fish sandwich in the

middle of the night. Could you imagine eating something like this back in Idaho?”

“I can’t even imagine Idaho,” Ostin said. He turned to Jack. “Do you think we’ll ever see Idaho again?”

Jack thought for a moment, then said, “Keep it in your mind, and you will.”

Vishal looked back and forth between the two, then said, “You mean Uh-Idaho in California?”

Jack laughed. “We’re not good liars.”

“No. You’re not.”

Just then one of the other men shouted, “Drone!”

Jack walked over to the east wall. The drone was approaching. Jack lifted his radio. “The drone is approaching. Prepare for sortie, Alpha.”

Ostin lifted his binoculars to examine the drone. “You may want to belay that order,” Ostin said.

Jack turned around. “Why?”

Ostin handed Jack the binoculars. “That’s not an observation drone. It’s carrying payload.”

Jack looked through the binoculars, then said, “We’ve got more than that.” He quickly lifted his radio again. “Everyone, inside the compound. I repeat, get inside the compound. Abort sortie. Abort sortie. Nikhil, are you there?”

“I’m here, Jack. What’s wrong?”

“Wake Enele. Tell him we’ve got an armed drone and a fleet of Apache helicopters incoming. The Elgen are coming.”



Hellfire Missiles

The first wave of Elgen attack helicopters consisted of the same twelve Apaches that had taken out the rebels' boats. Jack guessed that the Elgen had spotted Vishal's flotilla and had come to sink his boats as well. But if the Elgen knew about the boats, they ignored them. Instead, for the first time, they fired on the building.

Two Hellfire missiles streaked across the night sky, exploding against the east wall of the fourth floor, filling the open room with smoke and spreading shrapnel and chipped stone within yards of where Jack and Ostin were positioned.

"Get below!" Jack shouted. "Everyone, go below."

They all hurried down to the mostly enclosed third level.

"Can those missiles knock down these walls?" Jack asked Ostin.

"Not one of them," Ostin said. "Maybe not a dozen. But they can chip away at it."

"We could use Tanner about now," Jack said.

"We could use the whole freakin' Electroclan," Ostin replied. "And Michael."

In spite of the machine guns Jack and Ostin and the Tuvaluans shot at them, the helicopters confidently hovered around the island for nearly forty-five minutes, some dropping as low as ground level. They blew up all of the outer fences, destroyed the depository's few vehicles, and fired six missiles into the thick metal walls of the loading docks, which dented them but didn't penetrate.

After the attack, Ostin and Jack sat back, exhausted, against the east wall.

"That was weird," Jack said. "It's like they came just to annoy us. Like mosquitoes. What do you think their objective was?"

"They took down the fences," Ostin said. "There's only one reason they'd do that."

Jack looked at him, awaiting the reason. "And that reason is . . . ?"

". . . Ground troops," Ostin said. "Boots on ground. I think they're softening us up for a full-on invasion." He looked up at the helicopters. "You watch. They'll do what we were going to do, except they don't have any reason to hide. They'll keep sending guards over here until they're ready to blow the walls."

"I thought you said these walls were impenetrable."

"Nothing's impenetrable," Ostin said. "The walls can hold off Hellfire missiles but not everything."

"Like what?"

"A battleship's cannons."

"Fortunately, Enele sank their battleship," Jack said.

"I'm sure Hatch will find another one eventually," Ostin said.

"You're so optimistic," Jack said, shaking his head. "So, if you were Hatch, what would you do?"

"What would I do, or what would I do if I were Hatch?"

"Both."

"I would have just starved us out," Ostin said. "But I'm not Hatch. If I were and didn't care about the lives of my men, I'd start sending men over. Then, when I had a large enough force, I'd either send a detonation team to blow a hole in the wall or, preferably, find a battleship."

"Why is that preferable?"

“With our weapons, it would be too easy for us to take out a detonation team and capture their explosives. But a battleship, we couldn’t touch it.”

“Why would you *start* sending men over? Why not send them all at once?”

“Because they don’t have any ships large enough to transport all their men at once, so I’d send them in waves.”

“But if they had a battleship, they’d be able to kill two birds with one stone.”

“If by ‘birds’ you mean our resistance and all hope, yes.”

Jack groaned. “Then what would you do?”

“Then, after we had breached the wall, I’d throw in grenades and smoke bombs to clear the way. Then I’d send in soldiers to take the building.”

“Just like Hades,” Jack said.

“Just like Hades,” Ostin replied. “What would you do?”

“If I were Hatch, I’d punch a hole in the wall. Then I’d fire in a nerve agent, like sarin.”

“You’d have to be sick to do that.”

“‘Sick’ is Hatch’s middle name,” Jack said.

Ostin frowned. “Let’s just hope he doesn’t have any sarin.”

* * *

A half hour later Enele came up to the third floor to inspect the damage.

“Are you okay?” he asked Jack and Ostin.

“Yes.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Tomas got some shrapnel in his hand, but nothing too serious,” Jack said. “He’s got it wrapped up. How about below?”

“One casualty,” Enele said curtly. “War council in thirty minutes.” He turned and walked away.

* * *

Less than an hour later the same group from before was gathered for war council in the conference room. Everyone except for Adam.

“We’re all here,” Enele said.

“Where’s Adam?” Ostin asked.

The room went quiet, except for Raphe, who was softly crying, his face concealed behind his hands.

“He’s the casualty,” Enele said, forcing himself not to show emotion. “He went out to get a better shot at the helicopters.” His face fell. “They saw him.” Suddenly the anger showed in Enele’s eyes. “This is just the beginning. We must accept that the Elgen are preparing for an invasion. This is better than being starved out, but we must also prepare. We’ve taken full inventory of what weapons and ammunition we have. We are limited and cannot afford to waste, but I believe we have enough.

“To attack us, their biggest problem is getting inside. They can only do this with explosives. There are three ways they can accomplish this. They can drop a bomb from the air. They can, on ground, deliver explosives. Or they can shell us from a battleship. We are fortunate in this regard. They clearly do not have aerial bombs, or they would have used them on Hades. We do not know if they have land explosives, but we know we took all they had at Vaitupu, and Captain Pio then used them to sink their battle cruiser. But if they do have more, we will not allow them near the building. Lastly, we do not believe that they have a battleship; as I said, Captain Pio has sunk it. So, for now, we have a short reprieve. In addition to preparing our men for these three possible situations, how do we best use that time?”

“We never should have come here,” Tomas said. “The old man was wrong. Now we are just papaya waiting to be picked. We should have followed our first plan and attacked Funafuti.”

“We would have died on Funafuti,” Nazil said.

“We’ll die here,” Tomas said. “At least we would have spilled some of their blood.”

Enele said, “Where we are is all that matters now. We must deal with our present situation, not rethink the past choices.”

Raphe raised his hand. “Sir, is it possible to still move toward my original plan?”

Enele was quiet a moment, then said, “Yes. I do not think we will have time to move the whole of our army, but it is still preferable. But the increase in drone activity makes it even more risky.”

“At this point, sir, all options are risky,” Nazil pointed out.

“Well said, Nazil,” Enele said. “I would like to appoint Jack as my second-in-command in charge of keeping the Elgen away from the building.” Enele looked at Jack. “Do you accept that responsibility?”

Jack nodded. “Yes, sir. I’m honored.”

“I know you will succeed. Nazil, you will be in charge of the troops inside the building. I ask you to design a plan to hold off the Elgen should they gain access to the building. They will likely parachute in. In that case Jack and his men will be the first line of defense. If they blow a hole with explosives, I would expect them to take aim at our structurally weakest point—the metal gates of the loading dock. I believe that is why the Elgen helicopters targeted them, to test their strength. As we all saw, the gates are vulnerable. Perhaps not to Hellfire missiles, but certainly to something more powerful. Like a vehicle loaded with explosives. Jack, it is your responsibility to keep them away from the building.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Nazil, we must have a plan to protect the north loading dock if they manage to break through.”

“Yes, Enele.”

“If they are to shell us from the sea, it will be the eastern or southern side of the building that they will target.”



Why Did the Elgen Cross the Channel?

The next four days on Plutus were quiet except for the drones. The Elgen had increased the flybys to every two hours. On the third day Jack took a shot at one just out of anger.

“That’s not going to do any good,” Ostin said.

“It did me good,” Jack said. He put down the rifle. “What are they looking for?”

“They’re just making sure we stay put,” Ostin said. “Or trying to drive us mad.”

“It’s working,” Jack said. “They’re not bringing men over.”

“Which means Hatch is waiting for a ship.”

Then the drone did a second flyby.

“That’s new,” Jack said. He lifted his binoculars. “It’s circling.”

“Is it carrying payload?”

“No.” Then Jack lowered his binoculars to the eastern horizon. Then he groaned. “It doesn’t need it.” He turned back to Ostin. “You were right. Hatch found a battleship. And a few others.”

Ostin lifted his own binoculars. “Oh no.” A moment later he said, “Wait, we know those ships. I recognize the flag. They’re Filipino.” He

lowered the binoculars. "They're probably the same ships that captured us in Fiji."

"Now the Filipinos are helping out," Jack said. "Why would they help Hatch?"

"Because he owns them," Ostin said, still looking at the ship. "It's got sixteen-inch cannons." He turned back to Jack. "We're so screwed."

* * *

It wasn't a direct hit, but the battleship's first shell exploded with a deafening boom that shook the entire depository. Even though the shell struck the rock shore twenty yards in front of the southeastern wall, it was big enough to rip away pieces of the outer wall and scatter rock higher than the depository. Smoke rose above the building.

Enele and Raphe came running up. "What was that?" Enele shouted.

"They've got a battleship," Jack said, handing Enele his binoculars. Enele looked out at the ship and shook his head. "There are four ships."

"They're the same ships that captured the *Joule*," Ostin said. "I'm sure the others are carrying soldiers."

There was another boom in the distance, and a second shell struck. This one caught a corner of the southeast wall. Jack ran over to the nearest opening and leaned out. "They've breached the wall. It's twelve feet up, too high for them to climb."

"They'll keep firing," Ostin said. "That particular battleship can hold nearly a thousand rounds."

"We are screwed," Jack said. "Maybe they'll just shell us into oblivion."

"If they hit this floor, it will kill us all," Raphe said, grabbing Enele. "We've got to evacuate this floor."

"No," Jack said. "Once they blow a hole in the wall, the soldiers are going to pour in. We need the machine-gun nest to stop them from getting inside."

“Then we can come back up after they’ve landed their men and have stopped shelling.”

“He’s got a point,” Ostin said. “They’ll stop shelling after they land their own men. We can watch from the third floor.”

As they evacuated the fourth floor, Ostin said to Jack, “Why did the Elgen cross the channel?”

Jack looked at him. “Why?”

“To kill us.”



Losing Faith

As the ships neared the island, the shells fell with greater accuracy. The fourth and fifth shells struck within seconds of each other, creating a hole big enough for a dozen men to enter at once.

“They got their front door,” Jack said.

“She’s still coming closer,” Ostin said. “And the other ships are turning north.”

“That’s where the dock is,” Enele said. “They are preparing to land.”

Then Nazil and Tomas came up to the third floor. “Enele, they’ve opened the wall,” Nazil said. “Your orders?”

“My orders remain as before. We know where they are coming; prepare your men to hold the fortress.”

“We are prepared,” Nazil said. “We have a machine-gun nest in place.”

Just then another shell struck. It was well placed and landed a few yards inside the hole they’d blown in the wall. It shook the building and filled the lower level of the depository with smoke.

“Enele, you need to get below to the vaults,” Raphe said. “They can withstand the ship’s cannons.”

Enele didn’t move.

“Sir.”

“Why? So Hatch can put me in a monkey cage like my grandfather? No, I’ll fight to the end. I will stand here when the *Uira te Atua* comes in his glory.” He looked out over the ocean and the nearing ships. “*Uira te Atua*, do not let our faith be in vain.” Then he said, “Why is he waiting?”

“Because he is not coming,” Tomas said. “Because it is all just myth.”

“Do not speak so,” Raphe said.

“We are doomed,” Tomas said.

“Go below with your troops,” Enele ordered.

“Troops,” Tomas said. “They are basket weavers.”

Nazil and Tomas left the floor.

Ostin said to himself, “Michael, if you’re coming, now would be a good time.”

* * *

The good news was that the battleship stopped shelling the depository. The bad news was that it was because the other three Filipino ships were about to dock and release their troops.

Looking out the north wall slot of the fourth level, Jack could see the ships lined up, the men on dock armed and ready to swarm the island. He estimated that there were at least several thousand soldiers just on the first ship, half Elgen, half Filipino. Hatch had efficiently brought in his guard from around the world. “Here they come.” He turned back to Ostin. “It’s déjà vu.”

“Yeah,” Ostin said. “Hades all over. Except this time, it’s without Michael.” He breathed out heavily as a gangplank began to extend from the ship.

“At least we’ll be with him soon,” Jack said.

“What do you mean?”

Jack pointed skyward. “In heaven.”

“You think there’s a heaven?” Ostin asked.

“There’s got to be.”

“Why is that?”

“Look around you. We know there’s a hell. There’s got to be balance, somewhere.”

“What if there’s not?”

Jack shook his head. “Then we’ll never know, will we?”

Ostin’s eyes filled with tears. “My poor parents.”

“They’ve got their own problems. In some ways, we’re the lucky ones.”

“How’s that?”

“When you’re dead, you’re free. No pain, no Elgen. No Hatch.”

“No fear,” Ostin said.

“Are you afraid?” Jack asked.

Ostin nodded. “Terrified. Are you?”

Jack looked at him. “I try not to think about it.”

Just then one of the ships blew a horn.

“They do that before they unload,” Ostin said.

“I need to make sure everyone is ready,” Jack said.

He ran around the fourth floor, checking out his twelve riflemen and three machine gunners.

“This all the ammo we have?” Jack asked one of the machine gunners. In light of the growing enemy, the twenty-two boxes they had seemed inadequate.

“Yes, sir,” the gunner replied. “We brought up all we have.”

“All right. Don’t waste ammo. We’ll at least make them fight their way in.”

Just then a door opened on the ship’s second level and a second gangplank extended to the dock.

“What’s that?” Ostin said.

Jack looked out at the boat. “They’ve got a tank. That’s not fair.”

“We are so screwed,” Ostin said.

Jack looked at Ostin. “Remember that time when we caught you behind the school and Wade pantsed you, underwear and all?”

“I’ll remember that until the day I die. Which is probably today, anyway. Why?”

“Sorry.”

“You’re apologizing now?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I forgive you.”

“And Wade?”

“I’ll forgive him, too.”

“Thanks.”

“I don’t forgive Mitchell.”

“Well, he did let us hang out at his place when the Elgen were hunting us.”

“That’s true.”

“And he paid for all that pizza.”

Ostin sighed. “Okay. I’ll forgive him, too.” A moment later Ostin said, “Since we’re doing this, I need to apologize too.”

“For what?”

“Back when I found out that you were driving Michael and me to California, I told Michael that I didn’t like you.”

“Of course you didn’t. We pantsed you.”

“Yeah. Well, I also said if Wade was in a shark tank and asked for help, I’d throw in chum.”

Jack laughed. “Good thing you didn’t say that to my face. Back then I probably would have smacked you.”

“I figured.”

“Not that you did anything wrong, but I forgive you too. I think Wade would too.”

“Thanks.”

Jack and Ostin both looked at the tank sitting on the gangplank. “Our guns won’t do a thing to that,” Ostin said.

“See that tank in back?” Jack said. “The smaller one with the weird gun? It’s not really a tank.”

“What is it?”

“Really? I actually know something you don’t know?”

“I don’t know everything,” Ostin said.

“You could have fooled me. It’s an M132 armored flamethrower.”

“An unstoppable flamethrower. That’s not good.”

“No. If they’re smart, they’ll drive it inside that hole they breached and push us back. The halls are wide enough for it. And if not, they’ll just drive through them. We’ve got to tell Nazil to set the land mines.”

“This is all kinds of happy,” Ostin said. “Do you know where the flamethrower tank came from?”

Jack shook his head. “No idea.”

“Britain. It was developed late in World War II. They called it the Churchill Crocodile.”

“I always wanted a weapon named after me,” Jack said. “Like the Sherman tank or the Pershing missile.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I thought that would be cool.”

“I always wanted a university named after me,” Ostin said.

“It would have happened,” Jack said. “And there would be a statue of you in front of it. Ostin University.”

Ostin smiled. “People would get it mixed up with the University of Texas at Austin. Maybe it would have to be Liss University.”

“That’s a good name,” Jack said.

“I always thought you’d receive the Medal of Honor someday,” Ostin said.

Jack looked at him. “You did?”

“Yeah. Maybe you still will. Posthumously.”

Jack was suddenly quiet. “That may be the best thing anyone has ever said to me.” He looked back toward the enemy boat. “Why is that tank not moving?”

“No idea,” Ostin said. He breathed out heavily. “How do you think the girls are?”

“I try not to think about it.”

“Me neither. I wish they were here with us.” Ostin frowned. “No, actually, I wish they were with us but we were, like, five thousand miles away.”

“Back in Meridian, Idaho. PizzaMax.”

“Not there,” Ostin said. “I don’t think I could go there without Michael. Too many memories.”

“I wouldn’t even mind being at school.”

Ostin smiled. “Remember Principal Dahlstrom?”

“Yeah. What a tool.”

“It’s hard to believe that I was actually afraid of him.”

“Yeah, that’s weird.”

“I think if I ever see him again, I’m going to punch him. For old times’ sake.”

“He’d expel you.”

“Ohh, I’m afraid,” Ostin laughed. “Put me in his Cell 25.”

“Yeah, doesn’t sound that scary,” Jack laughed. “Just make sure I’m there for it.”

“You can punch him too,” Ostin said. “For good measure.”

They both laughed. Then their laughter quieted. After a few moments Ostin said, “It was a pleasure dying with you, friend. Not the dying part, per se, but being with you when it happened.”

“No,” Jack said. “It was a pleasure living with you.”

They looked at each other; then Ostin lightly hit Jack on the shoulder. Jack reached over and hugged him.

After they parted, Jack said, “I can see why Michael liked you so much. You’re much braver and stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

Ostin couldn’t speak. His eyes filled with tears. “Thanks.”

Jack smiled at him. Then they both turned and looked back out at the ship. The first gangplank had finished lowering, and the men were lined up at the top of it, about to come out. Jack sighed again. “Here they come.”

Then, out of a clear blue sky, lightning struck.

*Uira te Atua*

“Holy crap!” Ostin shouted. The massive blast of lightning had hit the top of the ship, dropping all of the men on board. It was so large that it shook the depository even more than the shelling had. The first strike was followed by a second, third, and fourth. The soldiers on board scattered; some jumped into the sea, others ran inside the ship, but most of them lay still on the deck. Then a blast of lightning blew apart the second gangplank, and both tanks fell into the ocean.

Enele, followed by Raphe, came running up to the fourth floor. Enele was out of breath. “Did you see that?”

“Still watching it,” Jack said.

“*Uira te Atua!*”

Lightning struck the ship over and over until there was no movement on board. Then the lightning moved to the ship behind it, then to the third.

“It’s a miracle,” Raphe said.

“No, it’s *Uira te Atua*,” Enele said. “The lightning god.”

Ostin lightly smiled. “No,” he said. “It’s my buddy Michael.”

* * *

After all signs of life had vanished from the three ships, the lightning began striking farther out at sea, hitting the battleship with such force that after just three strikes the ship was on fire.

“If that’s Michael,” Jack said, “he’s pissed.”

“Wow,” Ostin said. “That’s what vengeance looks like.”

Then a strike pounded down through the center of the boat. “That was huge!” Jack said.

Jack lifted his binoculars. “He sunk it!”

Ostin lifted his as well. “He did. It’s sinking! Go, Michael!”

The lightning stopped. “Let me look,” Enele said. Jack handed him his binoculars. “It is going down. *Uira te Atua* has saved us.”

Suddenly the sky above them began to brighten, as if collecting the light from the sun itself, then forming into a ball about thirty feet above them. It grew in brightness until it was too bright to look at and they had to turn away.

“What is that?” Raphe asked.

Then the ball began to crackle and spark as it slowly lowered to the floor. No one dared speak. Then the light began to diminish and pull in tighter, taking the shape of a human form. When the light had completely gone out, Michael stood in front of them.

Ostin shouted out, “Michael!” He ran to him, but Michael held out his hand to stop him.

“Don’t touch me. I’m not safe yet.”

Ostin stopped. “It really is you!”

A smile crossed Michael’s face. “Who were you expecting?”

“*Uira te Atua*?”

“You’re a what?”

“Nothing,” Ostin said. “It’s just *so* good to see you.”

“It’s good to be seen,” Michael said. He looked past Ostin. “Hey, Jack.”

Jack looked at him in awe. “I—I . . .”

“Yeah, it’s weird. I know. But it’s me. That was also me on the boat.”

“ . . . Our dream. That really was you.”

“Yeah, I was still figuring out how to get back to being human. It’s a little hard to explain where I’ve been.”

“Well, you could have come a little earlier,” Jack said, joking. “Maybe before we said our good-byes to each other.”

“No, that was good. People say things too late. It’s better this way. And you both got to apologize.”

“You heard us?”

“Every word,” Michael said. “But that’s not why I waited. I knew you’d need the boats to get off the island, so I waited until they delivered them to you. And don’t worry about the crew on board. I visited them. They’re going to cooperate fully.” Michael laughed. “At least once they get off their knees. They think I’m a god.”

“You’re not?” Enele said.

“No, Enele,” Michael said. “I’m Michael. And I’m proud of you. You have risen to greatness. It’s dark times like these that present us the canvas where we paint our own greatness.”

“Wow. You’re like a poet now,” Ostin said.

“I think the electricity opened up parts of my brain,” Michael said. “I might be as smart as you.”

Ostin just stared at him.

“But probably not,” Michael said, smiling. “Enough of this; we don’t have much time. Enele, take your men and get on the boats. I will meet you in Funafuti. Hatch is about to hurt our friends, and I need to stop him.”

“Michael,” Ostin said.

“Yes?”

“Thanks for what you did on Hades.”

Michael smiled. “That’s what friends are for.” He waved. “See you in a few hours.”

PART SEVENTEEN



The Brick

Thirty-six hours after speaking with Carl Vey, Hatch ordered the Electroclan brought to him in the massive, concrete-floored storage room beneath the rim of the rat bowl. The room was cold and humid and smelled of fish and seawater, since this was where the food for the rats was brought in. This time Hatch had ordered everyone to be present, including Sharon, Coonradt, and Welch. They had no idea why they were assembled. Strangely, there was a long, horizontal pile of bricks on the ground in front of them.

Just as strangely, the Electroclan's RESATs had been turned down to the lowest level they had experienced, and the youths could even feel some of their electric power. Ian could see more than twelve feet, and Zeus could make electricity spark between his fingers. The reduction in the RESATs' power allowed them to breathe and move normally, even though their hands were still cuffed behind their backs.

An hour and a half later Hatch walked into the room with Zara, six guards, and a short man with a hood over his head, escorted by a guard on each of his arms. When Hatch stopped in front of the kids,

the hooded man was brought forward just a few yards from them and made to kneel. From that distance they could see that the hood was stained in the nose and mouth region with blood.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I called this meeting,” Hatch said. “It’s a very special day. One that will go down in future Elgen history books. You might call it the Elgen Independence Day. A day matched only by the surrender of Cornwallis to George Washington at Yorktown. It marked the end of the Patriots’ struggle. The end of the resistance. And that is what today is for us. I received word two hours ago that the attack on the rebels on Plutus has come to an end. Everyone is dead or captured.” He looked at them. “They are presenting me with Enele Saluni’s head this morning. You’ll also want to know that two of your former colleagues were with them, Ostin and Jack.”

Abigail and McKenna both gasped.

“Yes, they were fools to return. I’m sorry to inform you that they didn’t make it. As we speak, their bodies are being brought here to be ceremoniously fed to the rats.”

“No!” Abigail and McKenna both screamed. Abigail fell first to her knees, followed by McKenna.

“Ostin . . .”

Taylor knelt down too and cried with them.

“War does wreak havoc on families,” Hatch said. “And speaking of families, I’d like to introduce you to someone of great significance to you. Greater significance than you possibly realize.” He reached over and pulled the hood off the man’s head. The prisoner’s hair was wet and tangled with sweat. Even though his head was bowed, they could see that his face was swollen and bloody. He had been severely beaten. “Do you know who this man is?”

The kids looked at him but no one spoke.

“Help us out here, Sharon.”

Sharon looked at the man, then said in a steely voice, “He’s my husband.”

“Indeed he is. This, young people, is the infamous Carl Vey. Husband to Sharon. Father to Michael. And, most of all, he’s the reason you’re all here. Carl Vey is the head of the resistance. He’s Dr.

Coonradt's boss. He's the one who gave you the insane command to come here and steal my boat. Why? Not for the reasons he told you. He wanted my boat, my *Joule*, and risked your lives for it, just so he could be unspeakably rich."

"That's not true," Vey said.

"Completely true," Hatch said loudly. "Just so we're clear, if it wasn't for Vey, you'd probably be out enjoying the life most teenagers have, instead of counting the seconds of your suffering. If it wasn't for this man, your friends Jack and Ostin would still be alive. If it wasn't for this man, Wade and Tanner and Gervaso and even Michael, his very own son, would still be alive." Hatch spit on Carl Vey with disgust. Then Zara walked up and spit on him as well. "Guards."

The guards walked through the group and uncuffed everyone except for Welch.

"What this man has done to you is unspeakable. So I'm going to give you a choice. I'm going to let you denounce this man. If you do, I will spare your lives." Hatch looked around the room. "You see in front of you a pile of bricks. All you have to do is walk up to this . . . lying, evil man, spit on him, and then hit him with a brick. And then you're free to join us. It's that simple.

"I know that sounds generous and you might wonder why, at this hour, I would offer it. This is why. I've come to the conclusion that it's not your fault you're here. It's his. And now is your chance to repent and be clean, to put your sins where they belong . . . on him. On Carl Vey." Hatch folded his arms. "Yes, this is a day for the history books. Who would like to go first?"

They all stood silently for a moment. Then Sharon Vey stepped forward and lifted a brick.

"Of course," Hatch said. "Of course you're the first. He abandoned you to a life of poverty. He took away your only son."

Carl looked up at his wife, his eyes filled with tears. Sharon stepped forward with the brick in her hand. She looked up at Hatch. "I've thought about this all night. I've wondered how he could have done this to his own family."

"Exactly," Hatch said.

"He left us alone. Destitute. Suffering."

“Yes,” Hatch said. “Incredible suffering.”

“And now my son is gone.” Her voice cracked, and fresh tears fell down her face. She cocked the brick back in her hand.

“I’m so sorry,” Carl said.

“Now he’s sorry,” Hatch said snidely. “It’s not hard to be sorry when someone’s about to hit you with a brick.”

Then Sharon looked up at Hatch. “And for all our loneliness, for all our suffering, my husband was more alone. He didn’t have our son with him. He didn’t have me to comfort him. He came here knowing that you would humiliate and kill him, just for the chance that I might not have to suffer. He sacrificed his life for us, for the world, not for his gain but because it was the right thing to do. This man is more than my husband. He’s a hero.” At that, she threw the brick at Hatch. The guards, caught unprepared, barely managed to pull him down to prevent the brick from hitting him.

“Get her!” Hatch shouted.

Just then all of the teens rushed forward and grabbed bricks and started throwing them at the guards. Sharon rushed to her husband and threw her arms around him. “You shouldn’t have come,” she said.

“I couldn’t not,” he replied.

“Freeze them!” Hatch shouted at Zara. “Freeze them!”

At first, Zara looked confused; then she raised her hand. Everything stopped. The youths, Coonradt, Welch, Sharon and Carl Vey, all were frozen, unable to move.

“Thank you, Cassy,” Hatch said almost to himself. “Such a useful power.” He wiped his forehead. In the uprising he had been struck by the corner of a brick, and blood was trickling down his face. Only one of the guards was seriously hurt.

Hatch took a deep breath. “You have all sealed your fate. It is over.” He walked over to where Sharon and Carl were kneeling together. “You got what you want. You get to die together.”

Sharon just looked at Hatch defiantly.

“All right. Let’s get on with this. Guards, prepare for their execution.”

Six of the guards fell in line, lifting their guns. “I’d ask if you had any last words, but I think you’ve already said enough.” He looked

over at the youths. "This is the beginning of the end. For all of you."

Just then there was the sound of gunfire. Then an alarm went off. Hatch pushed the button on his sleeve to activate his radio. "What's going on?"

"Admiral-General, we are under attack."

"By whom?"

"The Tuvaluan rebels."

"The Tuvaluan rebels are dead!"

"I don't think they got the memo," the voice came back. "They've taken out the power, and they've breached the gates. The outer guards have fallen."

"All guards to posts!" Hatch shouted. "You too," he said to his guards, "after we end them all. Execute the Veys. Fire."

Before the guards could fire, lightning struck them all, blowing their guns into the air. Hatch thought it was a result of the rat bowl above them. "Turn that thing off," he shouted.

Suddenly a brilliant lightning ball floating about twenty feet in the air began to fill the room. It started as a small, basketball-size orb, then grew in size and brilliance until it was more than twelve feet across. Then, as it started to descend, the light began to dissipate, leaving a human form. The figure's head was lowered, but when he raised it, his gaze was solidly on Hatch.

"It's my Michael," Taylor said. "He's back."



50

Pleading for Mercy

“Michael Vey,” Hatch said. “What’s with all you people being dead, then not being dead? Can’t you just stay dead?”

Michael shook his head. “No.”

“I’m not surprised. I always knew you’d be back. As the dog returns to his vomit.”

“That’s an appropriate metaphor,” Michael said, stepping toward him. He looked at Hatch with dark, electric eyes.

“Zara, stop him!” Hatch shouted.

Zara suddenly rose into the air, her hands raised in front of her. “You’re going to die, Vey,” she shouted.

“I already have,” Michael said. “You want my power? Take it.”

Suddenly there was a massive exchange of energy between them, and Zara looked like an electric transformer hit by lightning. She screamed, then fell to the ground. Her hair and clothes were on fire, and her skin had turned black as ash.

“She probably shouldn’t have done that,” Michael said. He turned back to Hatch. “It’s over, Hatch. It’s time to pay for all you’ve done.”

“For all I’ve done?” Hatch said. “For all I’ve done? I’ve advanced humanity, is what I’ve done. I’ve advanced science! Look at you. You’re nothing more than a science experiment gone wrong.”

Michael looked at Hatch without blinking. “You have no idea how wrong.”

Hatch turned to his guards, who had all picked up their guns. “Fire! Kill all of them!”

Michael turned and looked at the guards, lifting his hand so his palm was open to them. “I’m giving you a chance to put down your weapons and surrender. I’m offering you mercy.” Michael spread apart his fingers, and an oscillating blue-gold bubble surrounded him and the others.

“Now!” Hatch screamed. “Shoot them, now!”

Suddenly the room erupted with the popping of automatic weapon fire and the sound of bullets ripping through the air. But louder than the gunfire was the syncopated beat of an electrical buzz as Michael’s aura disintegrated the bullets, like moths flying into a bug zapper. Or more like a comet flying into the sun. Taylor thought Michael looked almost bored with the exercise. Then the bullets began tapering off as the guns ran out of ammunition.

“Keep firing!” Hatch shouted.

Michael looked at him quizzically. “Why?” He stepped closer to Hatch. “Only a fool thinks he can keep doing the same thing and get different results.” He looked at the guards and shook his head. “I offered you mercy, and you tried to kill us. So now I offer you justice.” Michael slightly bowed his head and pulsed. A powerful blue wave that sizzled as it bent the air shot out from him. The guards disintegrated faster than their bullets had, leaving on the ground glowing molten puddles of metal, all that was left of their guns.

Next he held up his hand and the RESATs all blew. Everyone breathed out in relief. The Electroclan’s power was back.

Michael looked at Hatch. “What am I going to do with you?”

Hatch turned and ran down one of the corridors. Michael didn’t move.

“He’s getting away!” Taylor shouted.

Michael looked at her with a slightly amused grin. “No, he’s not.” Then he rippled in an electric wave and vanished.

* * *

At the end of the dark corridor, Hatch ducked into one of the utility rooms below the bowl and locked and bolted the heavy steel door behind him. All around him were sweating pipes running from the bowl. He turned a valve, and a blast of steam shot out behind him. Then he pulled out his handgun. “Come get me, Vey.”

Suddenly the room began to glow with light. Hatch turned around to see Michael, glowing brightly, standing behind him. “Okay.” He looked around. “It’s kind of steamy, though.”

Hatch emptied his gun’s clip into Michael, but nothing happened.

Michael just looked at him pitifully. “After what just happened out there, you don’t really think that gun can do anything to me, do you?” Michael smiled. “I held lightning.”

Hatch dropped his empty gun to the concrete floor. “What are you going to do to me?”

“What should I do to the man who killed my friends? What should I do to the man who tried to kill my parents? To the man who just tried to kill me?” Michael cocked his head. “Well?”

Hatch was too terrified to speak. Then he squeaked, “Mercy.”

“Mercy? I don’t think you know what that word means. Do you have any idea what it’s like to be locked in Cell 25? When you stop knowing the difference between reality and pure horror? Yeah, I do.” Michael’s eyes narrowed. “There’s an idea. I could put you in Cell 25 for the rest of your life.”

Hatch turned white. “Please . . .”

“Please, yes, or please, don’t do that? Because just saying ‘please’ is kind of confusing.”

“Please don’t,” Hatch said.

“Okay, that makes sense.” Michael took a deep breath. “Then again, the terror of being strapped down and slowly lowered into the rat bowl. Not something I like remembering. Should I do that? Feed you

to your own rats? That would be kind of poetic. Kind of a Frankenstein's monster thing."

Hatch didn't speak.

"Or there's the one thing I haven't experienced personally, but I've seen the result. I could cut your tongue off and put you naked in a monkey cage. Three of your own inventions. I'll let you choose."

Hatch just looked at him fearfully. "Please, just kill me."

"Make up your mind unless you want all three. A month in Cell 25, a year in the monkey cage, then the rats."

Hatch turned and grabbed the door handle. Michael pulsed, shocking Hatch just enough to drop him to his knees. "There's no place you can hide, Dr. Hatch. I'm everywhere."

He looked up at Michael from the floor. "Mercy, please. Finish me!"

"You don't give orders anymore," Michael said. "I gave you a choice. Now, what will it be?"

Hatch closed his eyes, then said, "The rats."

"The rats," Michael repeated. "Good choice. Terrifying and painful, but the fastest of the three." Michael leaned against one of the pipes. "The problem with the whole rat thing is that I would be imitating you, and I never want to be accused of doing anything you would do. But then, if I put you in Cell 25 or in the monkey cage, that would also be an imitation, wouldn't it? And that would make me like you.

"But I can't leave you around either. You wouldn't stop trying to rule the world. You would just keep getting into trouble. So I'm going to show you what mercy is and just say good-bye."

Hatch looked up. "Good-bye?"

"Good-bye, Dr. Hatch."

Michael pulsed in full. The blast was so hot that it scorched the metal door behind Hatch a powdery white. Admiral-General Hatch, the self-proclaimed messiah, was nothing more than a pile of smoking ashes. Michael stepped on them as he walked through the door back out to the corridor. "So ends another would-be god."



Reunited

Michael walked back out to the bowl. He could have just rematerialized himself back, but he figured that everyone was already having enough trouble believing he was real, so he did his best to be normal. As he walked out of the dark corridor into the light of the warehouse, everyone stopped talking and looked at him.

After a moment Michael said, "It's just me." Still no one moved. "You can touch me. I figured it out."

Suddenly Taylor ran to him and threw her arms around him. "It really was you coming to me. It really was."

Michael kissed her face, then held her tightly. "Yeah, it was. I'm sorry. It took me a while to figure out how to get back."

"You came to me first," Taylor said.

"Of course I did." They kissed.

When they parted, Taylor said, "That tingles."

"Sorry."

Taylor smiled. "Don't apologize. Every girl wants to feel electricity when she kisses."

Michael turned toward his father and mother, who had stepped forward. His mother was crying and trembling. Michael walked over to her, and they hugged.

"I thought I had lost you," she said. "I never should have let you go."

"It's a good thing you did," Michael said. "Thank you." Michael kissed her on the cheek, then stepped back and looked at his father.

Carl Vey's eyes glistened as he looked at his son. "You've grown into a man," he said. "More than that, you've grown into a good man."

Michael looked at him for a moment, then fell into his father's arms. "I thought you were dead."

"I know. I did it for you and your mom."

Michael looked down for a moment and swallowed. Then he looked back up. "I know. If it wasn't for you, this world would have been owned by Hatch."

"No, Son," Carl said. "If it wasn't for *you*." Michael's father pulled him in tighter. "I'm so proud of you."

At that moment, for the first time, Michael broke down and wept. Not just for the reunion, not just because the battle was over, but for everything—for all their suffering and fear, the death of his friends, being sent into the rat bowl, even for Cell 25. Sharon stepped in and put her arms around him as well. For the first time since Michael was eight, the Vey family was reunited.

* * *

Michael was still in his parents' arms when there was a loud explosion and the doors of the warehouse flew apart. Cassy and Zeus were poised to stop them, when Enele, Jack, and Ostin came running inside the room, followed by a couple dozen of their soldiers. They stopped suddenly, surprised to find no one but their friends.

"Where's Hatch?" Jack shouted.

"He's gone," Abigail said.

"Where?"

"I mean . . . he's gone." She pointed to Michael.

"*Uira te Atua*," Enele said, and took a knee.

"Stand," Michael said. "It's just me."

“Make way,” Jack said, pushing past the others. “Coming in for the bromance.” The two of them hugged.

Then the rest of the Electroclan, one by one, came up to welcome back their friend. The last in line was Ostin. The two young men looked at each other, before Michael stepped forward and put his arms around Ostin. “Still glad you came to Pasadena with me, buddy?”

“I’d follow you to hell.”

“You did,” Michael said. “More than once. Was it worth it?”

Ostin looked around at all his friends. Then McKenna sidled up to him and took his hand. “Yeah,” he said. “Definitely. Life can’t be lived on a couch.” He suddenly lifted his shirt. “Besides, look. I have a six-pack.”

Michael hit Ostin’s stomach. “Like a rock, man. And you have a hot girlfriend.”

“He does,” McKenna said. “Literally.”

“I’m glad you came along,” Taylor said to Ostin.

Ostin smiled. “Bones?”

Taylor smiled and put out her fist. “Bones.”

Ostin turned to Jack. “I’ve got another one. Why did the Elgen cross the road?”

Jack smiled. “Easy. To get away from Michael Vey.”

PART EIGHTEEN

Epilogue

My name is Michael Vey. I'm finally back home in Meridian, Idaho. Home. It feels almost weird to say that. I can now honestly admit that I never thought I was going back. Part of me wondered if I even could. I once saw a movie about a soldier who was at war, getting shot at, defusing bombs—traumatic, high-stress stuff—then came home and the peace got to him. I hope that's not me. Probably not. I could stand a little peace.

A lot has happened in a very short time. Just minutes after the Elgen surrendered, Enele's grandfather was released from the monkey cage and taken to the hospital to recover. His friend, Elder Malakai, has been with him to help him through his recovery. It's been difficult for the former prime minister, but he has been given a lot of love and respect by the Tuvaluan people. He was one of the few who refused to bow to Hatch, and he suffered for it. But all heroes suffer.

Not surprisingly, his grandson, Enele, was named the new prime minister of Tuvalu. We were invited to his inauguration. We were also honored. Jack, Taylor, Ostin, and I were given the Tuvaluan Order of Merit, which is their country's highest honor. We wore ceremonial gowns and flowers wreaths on our heads. There was a lot of dancing going on. It was pretty cool.

We were also there when military honors were given posthumously to Gervaso and Tanner for the battle of Hades. I'm not embarrassed to say that there were a lot of tears shed. On the island of Niutao, the one we called Hades, there's now a monument erected to the Electroclan, who risked their lives for the Tuvaluan people. Gervaso's and Tanner's names are carved at the top.

On the homefront, we're not poor anymore. In part because my father took over the distribution of the *Joule's* cache. That's a job in itself. He made sure the families of those hurt in the resistance were taken care of for life, college funds, the whole shebang. And he took care of us. The truth is, it's the Electroclan's gold. And when you've

got a few billion sitting around, well, you can't even spend the interest.

On top of that, my father's now a big executive at the Elgen Corporation. It's weird to even think about that. The new board is thinking of changing the name of the company to VEYTRIC Inc. I don't know. It's kind of catchy. And it doesn't make me think of being eaten by rats every time I hear it.

Not everything in the reentry was smooth. There were a lot of questions asked, some that couldn't be answered. When people asked where we'd been, we just told them that Taylor, Jack, Ostin, and I had enrolled in the Elgen Academy in Pasadena and then it shut down. All true. We never tell them that we're the ones who shut it down. Or that we were almost killed in the process.

There were problems that had to be cleaned up, like with Taylor's parents and the whole kidnapping thing and the van blowing up. We kind of made a huge mess of things. But no one could really prove anything, anyway. And sometimes it's just who you know. When the president of the Philippines and the president of Taiwan called the secretary of state, who called Idaho's governor, who called the mayor, who called the police chief . . . Well, let's just say they let things slide. It happens. I'm not saying it's right. But it happens.

Fortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Liss were back in Idaho when the Elgen attacked Christmas Ranch. They had left just the day before. It was a beautiful coincidence. Maybe there are no coincidences.

Some things we lost we can never get back. Like our innocence. Or, like my father said, the time we could have had together.

Most of all, we'll never get back the friends we lost. Maybe it's being back in Idaho, but I think a lot about Wade. Especially when I walk out the back door, where he, Jack, and Mitchell tried to pants me and I shocked the daylight out of them. Strange, but if that hadn't happened, I never would have met Jack. And without Jack, well, I don't even want to think about that. It just goes to show you how good can come from bad.

It makes me sad that no one ever asks about Wade. He really had no one but Jack. Today there's a monument in the Meridian cemetery for him. It's a marble pillar with the words:

Wade West
He died a hero for his friends.
He'll live forever in our hearts.

Taylor wrote that. I thought it was really good. The pillar is six feet tall, taller than Wade was. That's good, because, in his own way, Wade was bigger than life. I once heard it said, there are no great men, just great challenges. I don't know if that's true. I know some great men and women, but maybe it was the challenges that made them great. If it hadn't been for Dr. Hatch's evil, Jack might never have found out how good or heroic he really was. Maybe that's true for all of us.

* * *

Strange, school didn't change all that much. I did. We all did. I still have Tourette's, but I'm not short anymore. Ostin's not chubby anymore. But school, well . . . same spaghetti with mystery sauce and that same sticker still stuck above my locker—the one of the skull with a lightning bolt in it. Someone said it was from an ancient rock band called the Grateful Dead. I don't know anything about them, but that sticker has me written all over it.

* * *

Of course, every school still has its bullies. My first day back I was walking down the hall with Taylor and Ostin when an overgrown, red-faced senior noticed my tics and stepped in front of me. "Hey, twitchy, you got your blinker on."

I looked up at him calmly. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Yeah, weirdo, I've got a problem with you."

"It's Tourette's syndrome, you moron," Taylor said. "And if I were you, I'd start apologizing before you get hurt."

"Straight up," Ostin said. "Just apologize, and maybe he'll let you go."

The bully stood there, not sure what to make of us.

"Look at him," Ostin said. "What an ape. He's got the frontal lobe of a baboon."

The guy turned to Ostin. "What did you say?"

"Sorry, I'll use small words so you can keep up," Ostin said. "You're clearly not the brightest crayon in the box. In fact, I think someone left your crayons in the sun."

Taylor laughed. "That's funny."

The bully blushed at being laughed at by a cute girl. "All right, dude. I'm going to pound blinky boy. *Then* I'm going to pound you into dust."

Taylor laughed again. "Man, did you ever pick the wrong guys to bully."

"Yeah, dude," Ostin said. "You're a *stupididiot* because that was the height of *stupididocy*. Like, inviting-Hitler-to-your-bar-mitzvah stupid."

I laughed as well. Then I said to the bully, "Look, man, I don't want to hurt you. So step aside and I'll let you walk away."

He looked at me like I was taking crazy pills. "You're going to let *me* walk away?" He laughed, though I could tell that, on some level, he was worried.

Just then Jack walked up. "Hey, bro." He was wearing a tank top that showed off some wicked bullet scars and his arm muscles, which, by now, looked more like most guys' thighs than biceps. In fact, his tattoo of the jackal was so stretched by muscle that it looked pregnant. "What's going on, loser-bait," Jack said to the bully. "You picking on my friend?"

The bully stepped back. "Oh, that's why you act so tough. You get your big brother to fight your fights."

"I'm not his brother," Jack said. "And I didn't come to fight for him. I came to see him waste you. This is Michael Vey, the same guy that took out Corky *and* me."

The guy looked at me nervously. "You're . . . Michael Vey?"

"He's legacy, man," Ostin said.

"You are my brother," I said to Jack. "So, bro, what should I do with this clown?"

"Just waste him," Jack said. "That's the language bullies understand. I ought to know."

The bully looked at me fearfully.

“No, wait,” Ostin said, stepping forward. “I got this.” Ostin looked the bully in the eyes, then took off his glasses. “All right, brain-swamp. Wanna dance?”

The bully looked at him, then at me and Jack; then he said, “I—I gotta go.” He turned and ran down the hall.

“Yeah, you better run,” Ostin shouted after him.

Taylor waved. “Good-bye.”

I turned to Ostin. “‘Brain-swamp’? ‘Wanna dance’? Where did that come from?”

“I don’t know,” Ostin said. “But it felt good.”

Jack and I hugged. “How’s reentry?” I asked.

“You know. Good seeing my sister. Still twelve credits from graduation. But Welch offered me the head security job at the Elgen Headquarters. Pays a fortune. He said I could bring my brother on too if I want.”

“Are you going to take it?” Taylor asked.

“Probably,” Jack said. “Abi thinks I should. It means we’ll have to move to Italy. That will suck.”

“Moving to Italy sucks?” I said.

“I can think of worse places to live,” Taylor said.

“I’m not saying Italy sucks,” he said. “It’s being away from my friends. From you guys.”

“We’ll come see you,” Ostin said. “We’ve got a couple of jets at our disposal.”

“That would be nice. And I could definitely get fat on pizza and pasta. But it won’t be PizzaMax.”

“Thank goodness for that,” I said.

Ostin gasped. “You didn’t.”

“I’ve seen the world, my friend,” I said. “Comparing PizzaMax pizza to real Italian pizza is like comparing Richard Simmons to Arnold Schwarzenegger.”

“Well said,” Ostin said. “Painful, but well said.”

“How is Abi?” I asked.

“She’s good. She’s thinking of going to nursing school. She could do that in Italy too.”

“That’s so cool,” Taylor said. “She would be the best nurse ever.”

Suddenly, down the hall, two girls in cheerleading outfits screamed. "It's Tay! Tell me it's true! Hey, Tay! Where have you been?"

We watched them bounce toward us in wonder. I looked at Taylor. "Where have you been, Tay?" I asked.

"A different world," she said.

"No," I replied. "A different universe."

The girls ran up to Taylor, practically mugging her. "Where have you been?" the first girl asked.

"Yeah," said the other. "Are you going to try out for cheerleading?"

Taylor looked at them and smiled. "No. I'm good."

"What?" the first girl said.

Her friend said to her, "She said she's good."

"We know you're good," the first girl said. "That's why you should try out."

"Thanks," Taylor said. "But I've got to go."

The girls looked stunned. "For rude . . .," they both said.

As the four of us turned to walk away, I asked Taylor, "There's really no part of you that still wants to be a cheerleader?"

"No," she said quickly. "Isn't that weird? For so long I thought it was all I wanted. And now . . ." She shook her head. "I'm good. I've got everything I need."

"So do I," I said. I suddenly laughed. "Ostin, what did you call that kid, stupidiot?"

"Yep. *Stupidiot*. See what I did there, I combined the two words to make them—"

"Yeah, we got it," Taylor said.

"Nice," I said. "I'm going to use that." I hit Ostin on the shoulder. "You know, for a geek, you've gotten pretty cool."

"McKenna helped," he said.

"We gals are good for you guys," Taylor said. She suddenly stopped and looked at me. "And someday, Michael Vey, I'm going to marry you."

"Whoa," Jack said, laughing.

"Where did that come from?" I asked.

"My brain," she said.

"Do I have a say in this?"

“Only if you say yes.”

I smiled. “You read my mind.”

“No,” Taylor said. “I didn’t need my powers for that.”

We kissed.

“Get a room,” Ostin said.

After Taylor and I pulled apart, Taylor said, “So, Boyfriend, they say that before you marry someone, you should go on a trip with them. You know, to really get to know them. What do you think?”

“I think we can check that off the list.”

“But if we ever get married—”

“We’re way too young.”

“I don’t feel young,” Taylor said.

“It’s not the years, it’s the mileage,” Jack said.

Taylor laughed. “Well, you guys don’t need to get all freaked out. I know we’re young, and I’m not shopping for a wedding dress. I was just going to say, if we were to get married and we had a family, do you think our children would be electric?”

I thought for a moment. “Only one way to find out.”

“I’m out of here,” Jack said. “See you after school.”

“Me too,” Ostin said. “Bones.”

“Bones,” Taylor and I said back.

* * *

My name is Michael Vey. I told you in the beginning that my story was strange. Very strange. I also told you that I had Tourette’s syndrome and I was electric. You probably didn’t see where all that was going. Neither did I. And I had to live it. I almost had to die it. What a ride.

You know, through all I’ve been through, I’ve learned something important about life. Something that might mean something to you, too. It’s something I had to go all around the world to learn, but it was worth it. It’s simply this: It’s not *all right* to be different. It’s freaking *awesome*.

Shock on, my friends.

Michael Vey

Michael Vey

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About the Author



RICHARD PAUL EVANS is the #1 bestselling author of the Michael Vey series, *The Christmas Box*, and the Walk series, as well as more than twenty other books. All his novels have appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and there are more than twenty million copies in print. His books have been translated into more than twenty-four languages and several have been international bestsellers. He is the winner of more than a dozen awards, including the American Mothers Book Award, and two first-place Storytelling World Awards for his children's books.

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SIMON PULSE / MERCURY INK

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

www.SimonandSchuster.com

First Simon Pulse/Mercury Ink hardcover edition September 2017

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Jacket designed by Jessica Handelman

Interior designed by Mike Rosamilia

The text of this book was set in Berling LT Std.

Library of Congress Control Number 2017945620

ISBN 978-1-4814-9703-9 (hc)

ISBN 978-1-4814-9705-3 (eBook)